

80 PAGES
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FOR MATURE
READERS



MS. TREE
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Ms. TREE QUARTERLY

A COMPLETE Ms. Tree Thriller
by MAX ALLAN COLLINS
and TERRY BEATTY



PLUS:

MIDNIGHTTM

by Edward Gorman
and Graham Nolan

BATMAN[®]

by Dennis O'Neil
and Mike Grell

I WAS SLEEPING.



I WAS DREAMING.



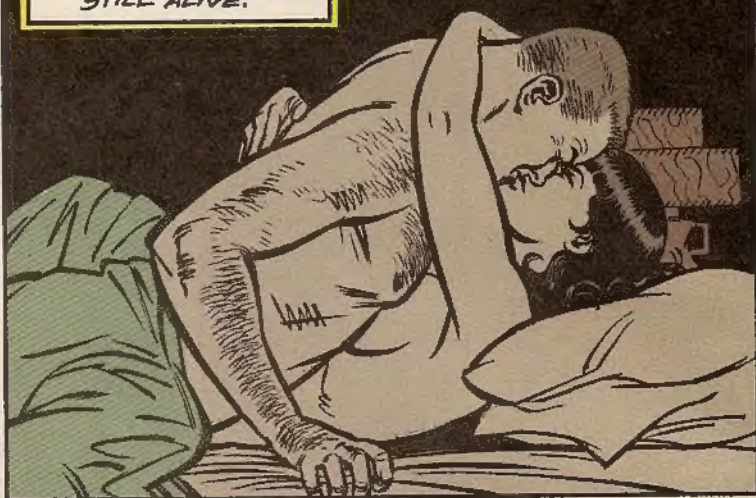
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MY DREAMS AREN'T
ALWAYS SO SWEET.



IN MY DREAM,
MY HUSBAND WAS
STILL ALIVE.



VERY ALIVE.



BRRRP!

MY PHONE IS
UNLISTED.



ONLY A PRECIOUS FEW
HAVE THE NUMBER.
EVEN AT THREE -
SOMETHING IN THE
MORNING, ITS
OBNOXIOUS LITTLE
RING IS NOTHING
I IGNORE.





WHAT ?

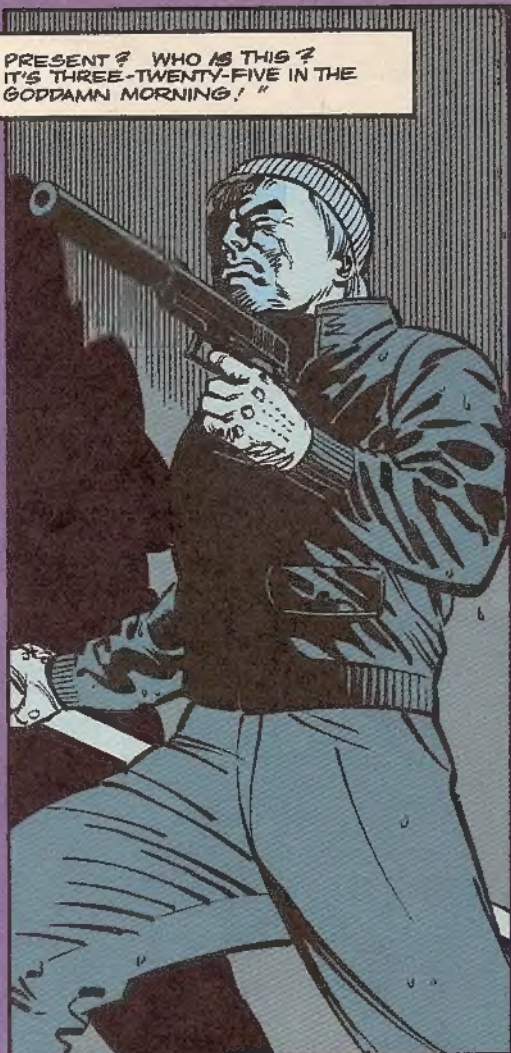
I HAVE A
PRESENT
FOR YOU.

"PRESENT ? WHO IS THIS ?
IT'S THREE-TWENTY-FIVE IN THE
GODDAMN MORNING ! "



IT'S LATER THAN
YOU THINK,
MS. TREE.

I AM
NOT
AMUSED.



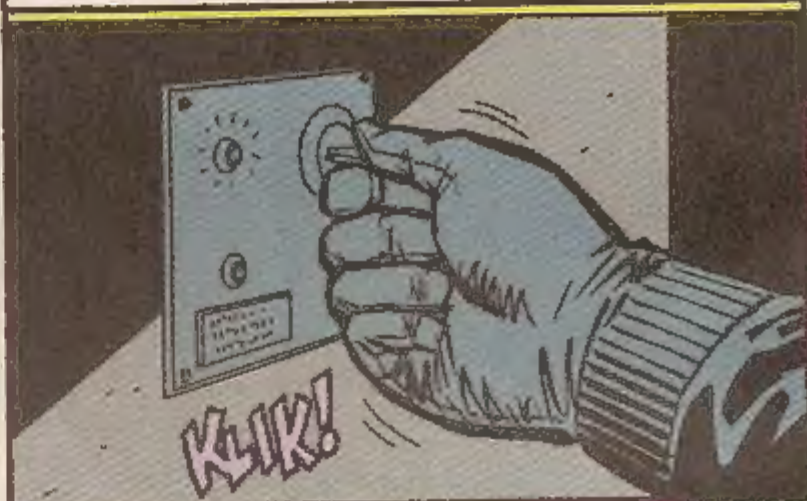
"PERHAPS NOT - BUT YOU WILL BE PLEASED
TO LEARN, I THINK, THAT THE ASSASSIN
WHO KILLED YOUR HUSBAND... *HOW*
MANY YEARS AGO ? "





WAS THIS A CRANK CALL? WITH THE ENEMIES I'D MADE IN THE LAST EIGHT YEARS, I COULDN'T TAKE THAT CHANCE... EVEN THOUGH MY SECURITY ALARM SYSTEM WAS ON...

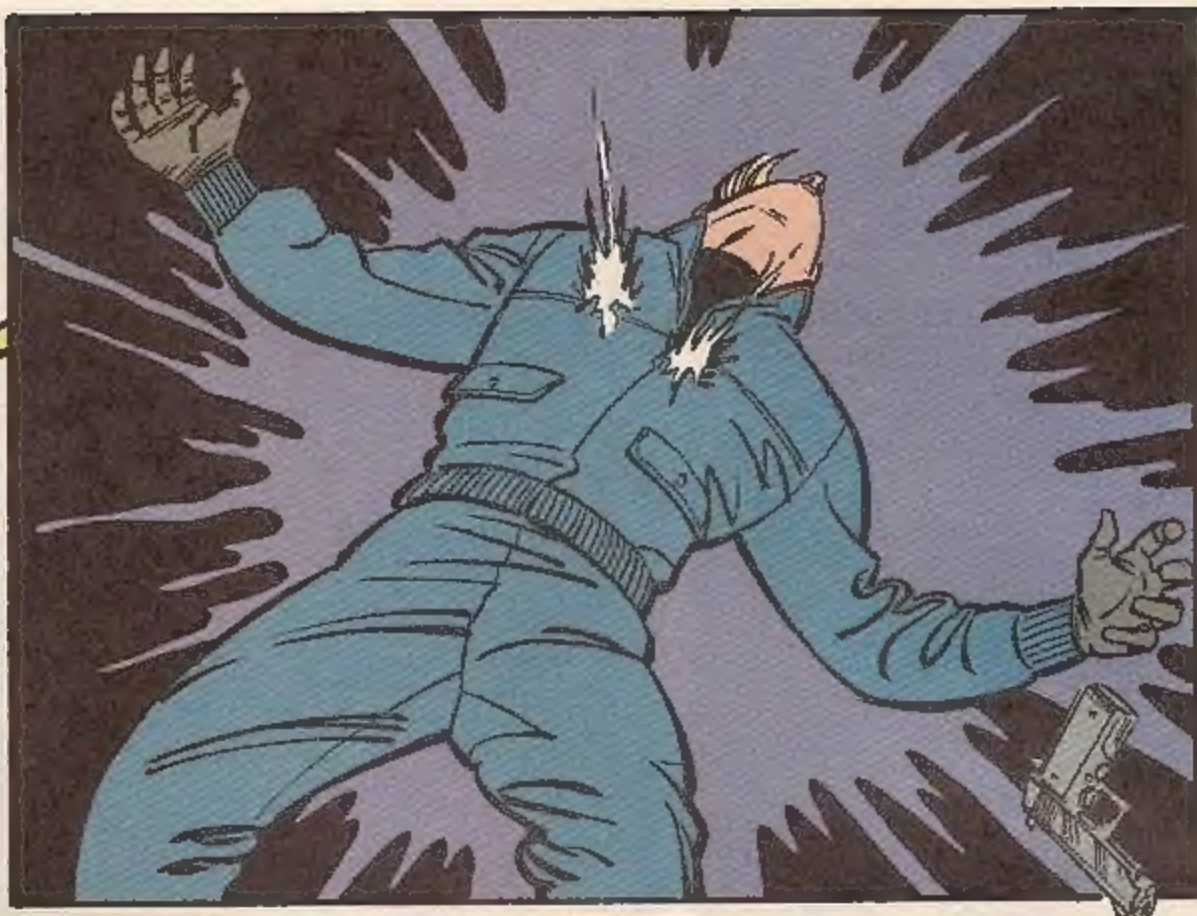
... AND IF ANYONE HAD ENTERED WITHOUT THE KEY TO TURN THE SYSTEM OFF, THAT ALARM WOULD SOUND WITHIN THIRTY SECONDS OF ENTRY.



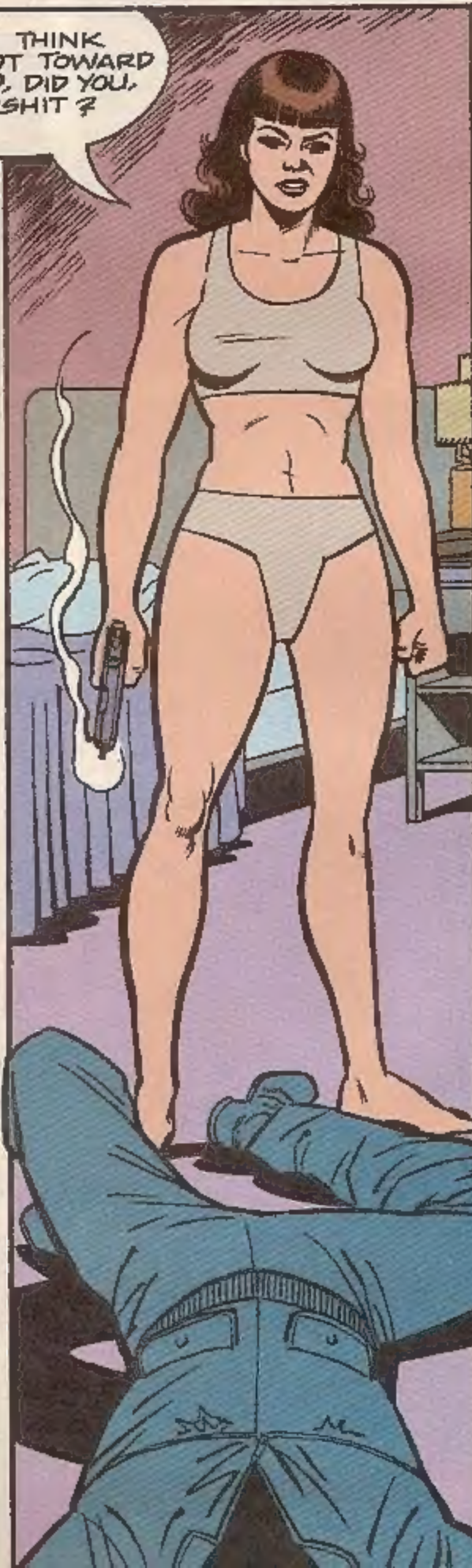
ON THE OTHER HAND, ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS A PRIVATE DETECTIVE LEARNS IS THAT THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A RELIABLE SECURITY SYSTEM.



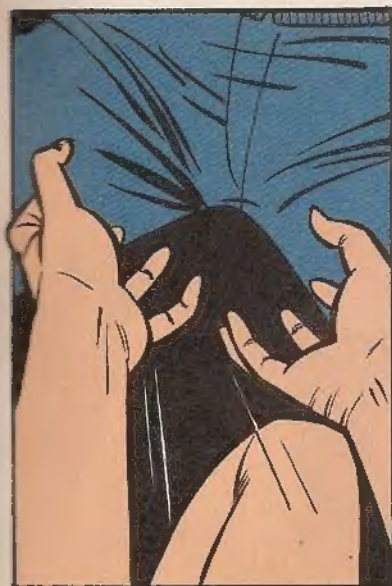




DIDN'T THINK
TO SHOOT TOWARD
THE BED, DID YOU,
DIPSHIT?



I WONDER
IF YOU ARE
THE ONE...





Ms. TREE

MAX ALLAN COLLINS TERRY BEATTY
writer artist
CREATORS

GARY KATO TOM ZUIKO
letterer colorist
KATIE MAIN MIKE GOLD
development editor
associate

GIFT

OF

DEATH



I'D KNOWN RAFE VALER A LONG TIME. HE WAS A HOMICIDE LIEUTENANT NOW.

IT TOOK SOMEBODY WELL-OFF AND WELL-CONNECTED TO SEND IN A PRO LIKE THIS.



RAFE HAD BEEN A ROOKIE WHEN MY HUSBAND MIKE TOOK HIM UNDER HIS WING. MIKE WAS A COP THEN, TOO - IRONICALLY, IT WAS AS A PRIVATE DETECTIVE THAT HE DIED IN THE LINE OF DUTY... WORKING FOR THE D.A. ON MOB-INFLUENCED POLICE CORRUPTION.



IS THIS A MOB HIT, MICHAEL? IS THE MUERTA FAMILY FINALLY SETTLING UP WITH YOU?

ASK HIM.



"CUTE, MICHAEL. HOW LONG CAN THIS GO ON? HOW LONG DO YOU THINK I CAN COVER FOR YOU?"

I SAID NOTHING.



"THE MUERTA FAMILY KILLS MIKE," RAFE SAYS. "YOU KILL DOMINIC MUERTA... NOT TO MENTION GOD KNOWS HOW MANY OF HIS SOLDIERS. WHERE WILL IT END?"

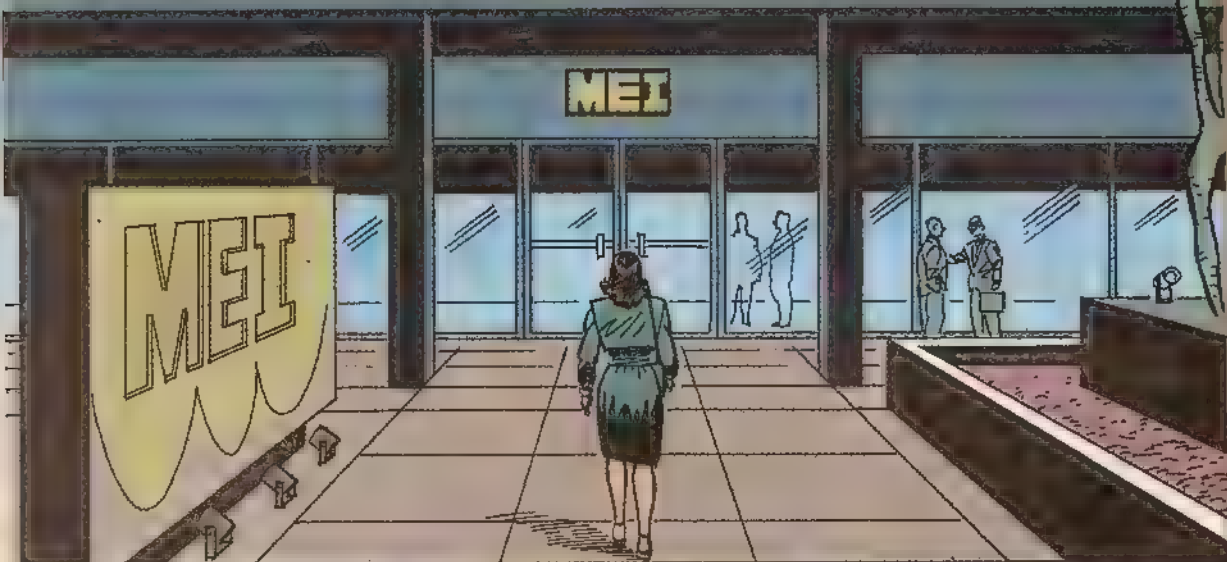
I SAID NOTHING.



"I THOUGHT YOUR WAR WAS IN A STATE OF TRUCE,"
RAFE SAID. "I THOUGHT YOU AND MUERTA'S
SISTER DOMINIQUE HAD AN UNDERSTANDING—"

I SAID NOTHING. BUT, I THOUGHT: SO DID I.

WITH THE MORNING, I WENT DIRECTLY TO
MUERTA ENTERPRISES INTERNATIONAL.
I HAD MY HAND IN MY PURSE, TO PRESENT
MY BUSINESS CARD, IF NECESSARY...



A NINE-MILLIMETER
BUSINESS CARD.

MICHAEL TREE
TO SEE
DOMINIQUE MUERTA.
I DON'T HAVE AN
APPOINTMENT,
BUT...

GO
RIGHT IN,
MS. TREE...

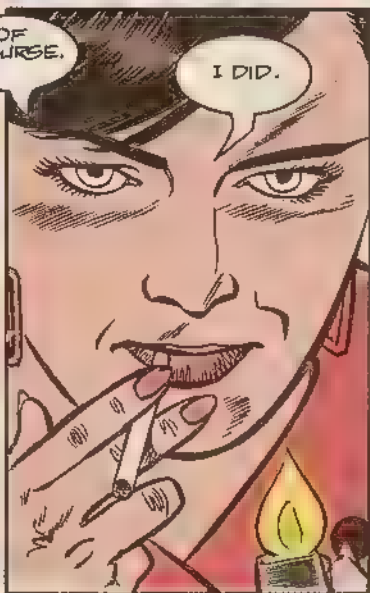
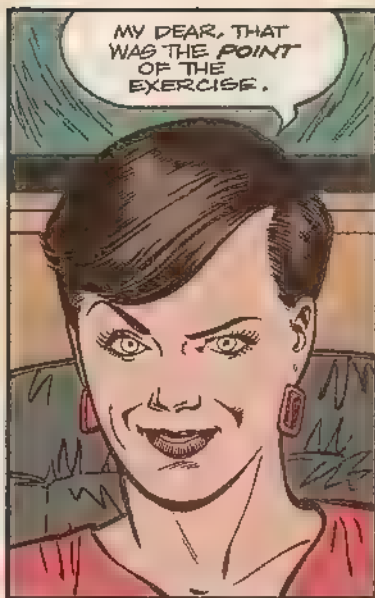


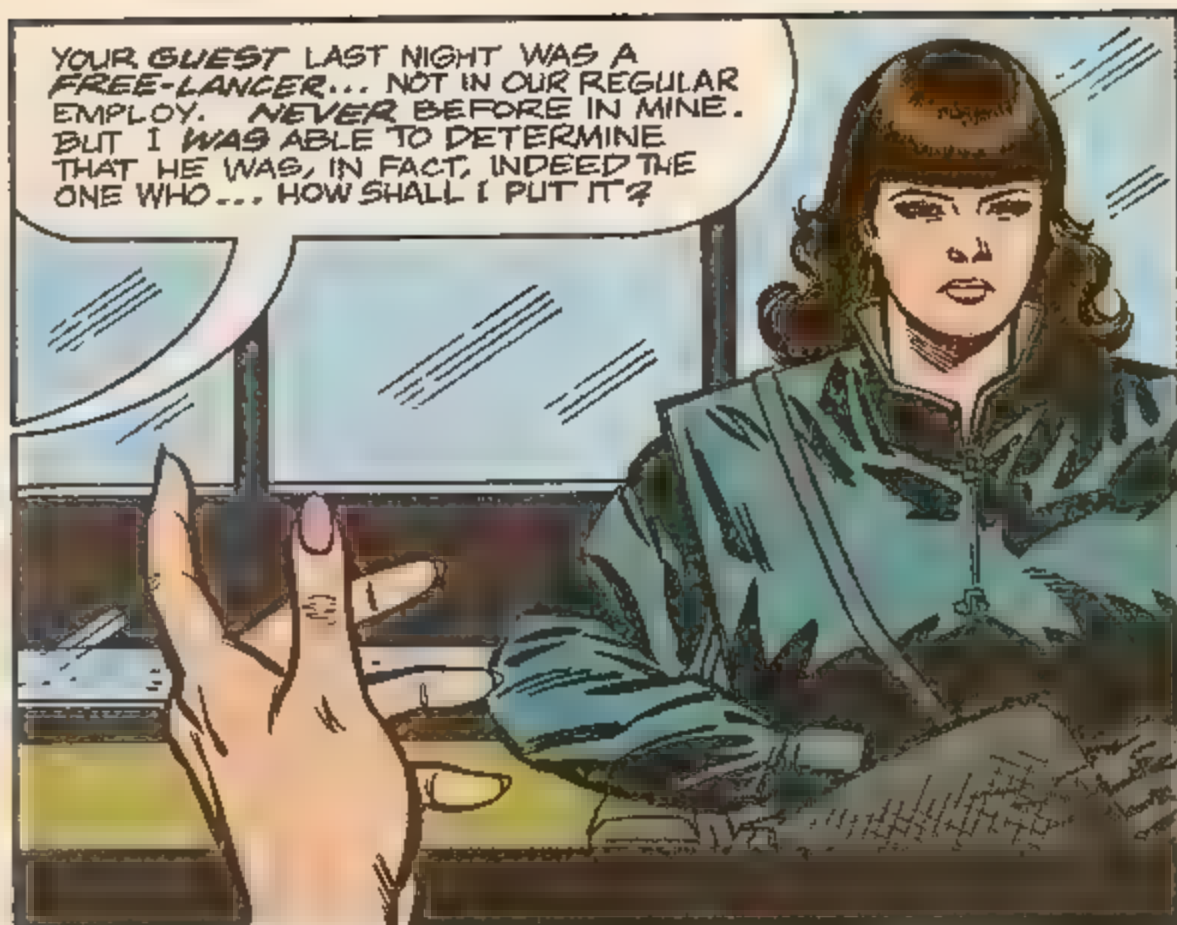
...YOU'RE
EXPECTED.



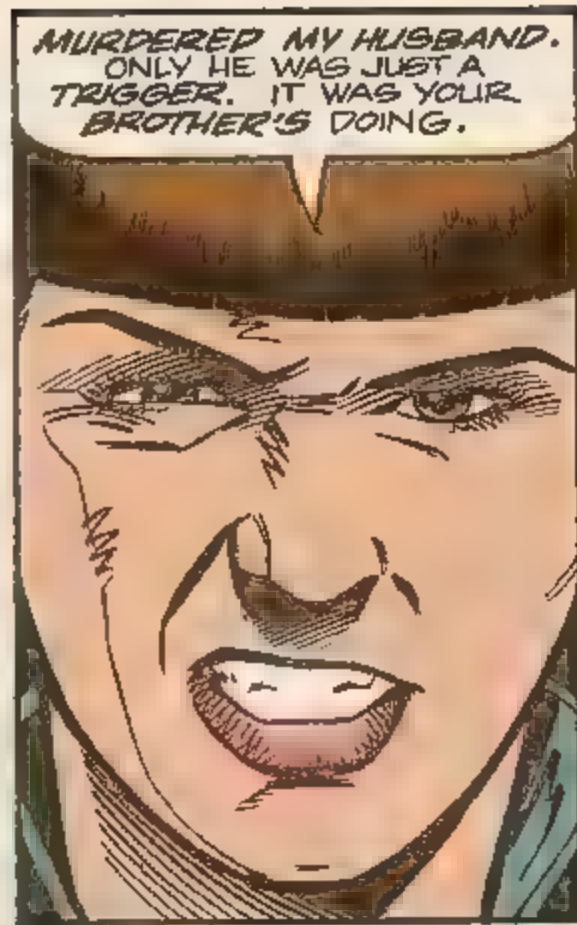
GOOD MORNING, MS. TREE.
I TRUST YOU ENJOYED MY
LITTLE PEACE OFFERING
LAST NIGHT.







YOUR GUEST LAST NIGHT WAS A **FREE-LANCER**... NOT IN OUR REGULAR EMPLOY. **NEVER BEFORE** IN MINE. BUT I **WAS** ABLE TO DETERMINE THAT HE WAS, IN FACT, **INDEED** THE ONE WHO... HOW SHALL I PUT IT?



MURDERED MY HUSBAND. ONLY HE WAS JUST A **TRIGGER.** IT WAS YOUR **BROTHER'S** DOING.



"AND YOU HAD YOUR REVENGE ON MY BROTHER, DIDN'T YOU, **MS. TREE**? YOU **MURDERED** HIM IN **COLD BLOOD.** YOU WENT TO **JAIL** FOR IT... YOU WENT TO A **MENTAL WARD**...

BUT THAT IS IN THE **PAST.** WE MUST LET **BYGONES** BE **BYGONES.**

BYGONES BE BYGONES? LADY, YOU'RE THE NEXT CANDIDATE FOR THE **LAUGHING ACADEMY!**

NO, I'M **QUITE SANE.** IT'S TIME WE PUT OUR DIFFERENCES BEHIND US, **MS. TREE**... **MICHAEL.** THAT'S WHY I SERVED YOU YOUR HUSBAND'S KILLER ON A **PLATTER.**



WE DO HAVE MUCH IN COMMON, MICHAEL. WE ARE LONELY IN THE WAY STRONG WOMEN IN THIS COUNTRY OFTEN ARE. YOU RUN YOUR OWN BUSINESS, SMALL THOUGH IT IS COMPARED TO MY RESPONSIBILITIES...

LIKE ME, YOU HAVE MANY ACQUAINTANCES BUT FEW FRIENDS. AND PERHAPS, LIKE ME, THERE'S ONLY ONE OTHER PERSON FOR WHOM YOU FEEL SOMETHING...TENDER.

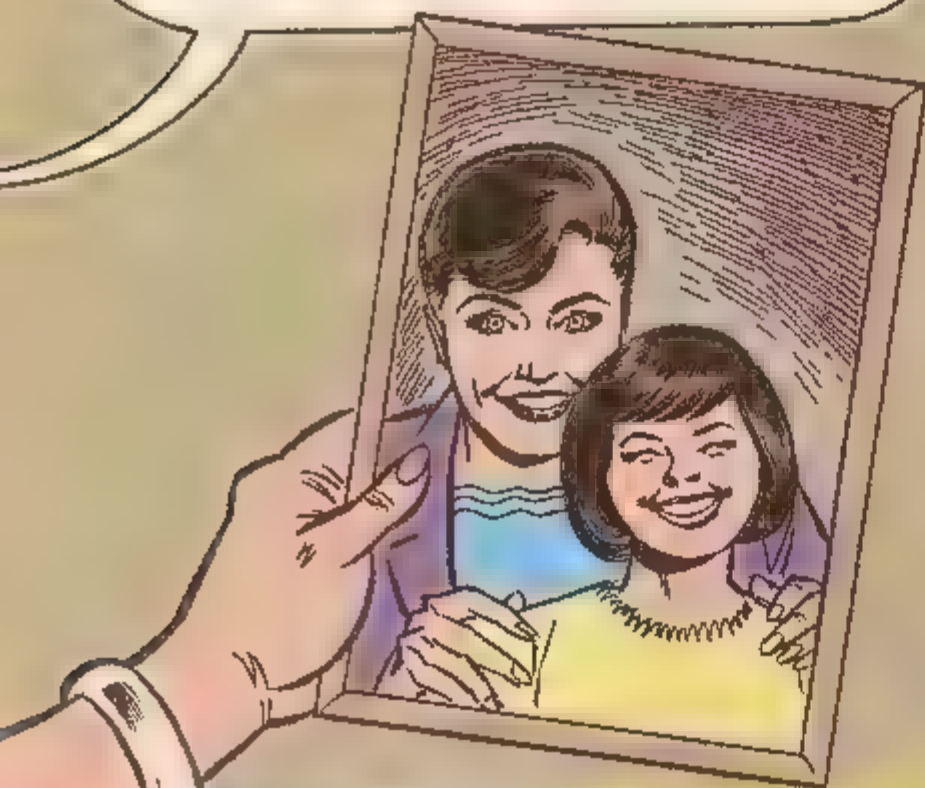
"YOUR STEPSON - MICHAEL TREE, JR. - MEANS EVERYTHING TO YOU... HE'S YOUR LINK TO YOUR LATE, LOST HUSBAND."

"YOU THREE ARE LINKED INEXORABLY - THE THREE OF YOU EVEN SHARE THE SAME FIRST NAME. UNUSUAL NAME FOR A WOMAN - MICHAEL."

MY FATHER WANTED A BOY. SOME WOULD SAY HE DAMN NEAR GOT ONE. BY THE WAY, YOUR SECURITY HERE SUCKS.

THAT'S PART OF WHAT I WANT TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT. AND YOU DON'T NEED THAT GUN. PLEASE.

LISA - MY DAUGHTER - IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PERSON IN MY LIFE. AND I WON'T HAVE HER HURT. I WON'T ALLOW THAT...



"AS YOU WELL KNOW, MS. TREE... MICHAEL... OUR CHILDREN HAVE NOT YET GOTTEN OVER THEIR INFATUATION. I HAD THOUGHT THEIR ATTACHMENT, FORMED IN THEIR CHANCE MEETING AT GREENWOOD ACADEMY, WOULD FADE, WITH TIME..."



YOU SHOULD'VE LET IT RUN ITS COURSE. INSTEAD YOU SENT HER PACKING WHO-KNOWS-WHERE... THAT SORT OF TACTIC ONLY FUELS YOUNG LOVE.



SO I'VE LEARNED. ONE WOULD THINK A CONVENT SCHOOL IN SWITZERLAND WOULD HAVE BEEN FAR ENOUGH...

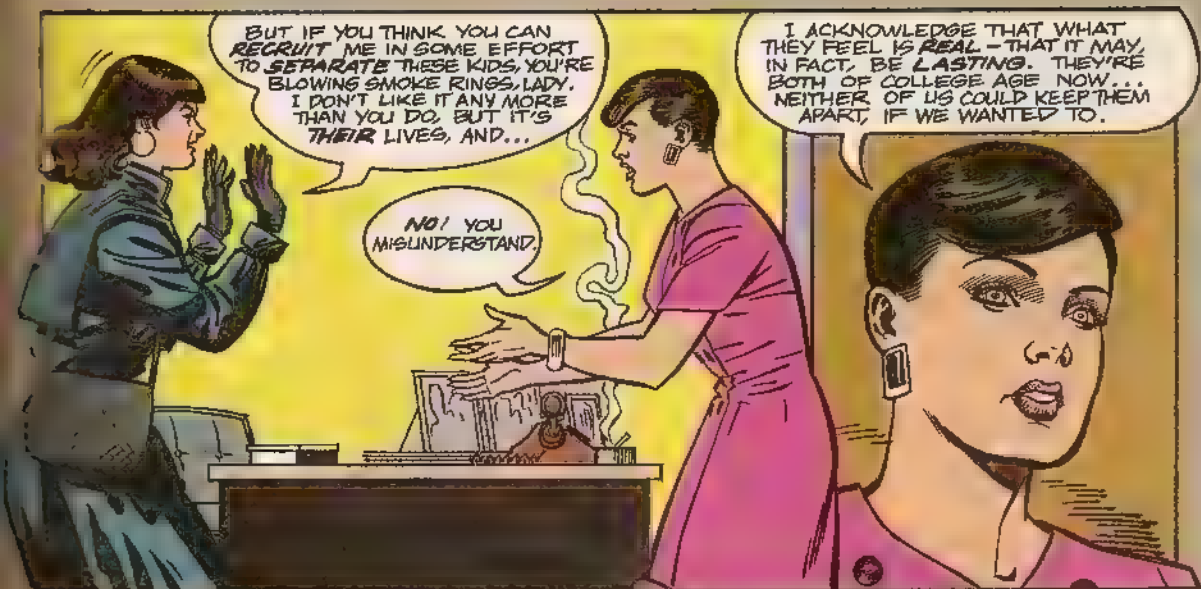


"... BUT ON HER OCCASIONAL VISITS HOME, SHE'S SEEN YOUR MIKE, AND NOTHING WILL STOP HER. NOTHING I SAY OR DO."



"I KNOW," I SAID. "AND I'VE SEEN THE STACK OF LETTERS FROM LISA, HIDDEN AWAY IN MIKE'S DRAWER... IT'S NONE OF MY BUSINESS, BUT THEN I AM A DETECTIVE."



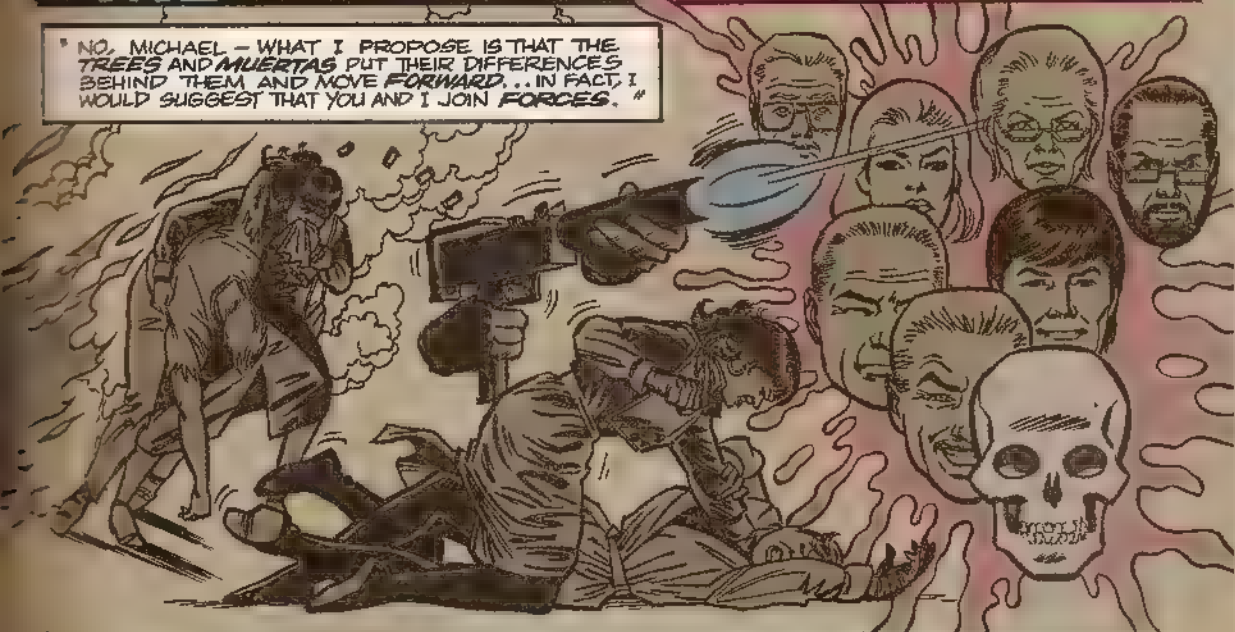


BUT IF YOU THINK YOU CAN RECRUIT ME IN SOME EFFORT TO SEPARATE THESE KIDS, YOU'RE BLOWING SMOKE RINGS, LADY. I DON'T LIKE IT ANY MORE THAN YOU DO, BUT IT'S THEIR LIVES, AND...

NO! YOU MISUNDERSTAND.

I ACKNOWLEDGE THAT WHAT THEY FEEL IS REAL - THAT IT MAY IN FACT, BE LASTING. THEY'RE BOTH OF COLLEGE AGE NOW... NEITHER OF US COULD KEEP THEM APART, IF WE WANTED TO.

"NO, MICHAEL - WHAT I PROPOSE IS THAT THE TREES AND MUERTAS PUT THEIR DIFFERENCES BEHIND THEM AND MOVE FORWARD... IN FACT, I WOULD SUGGEST THAT YOU AND I JOIN FORCES."



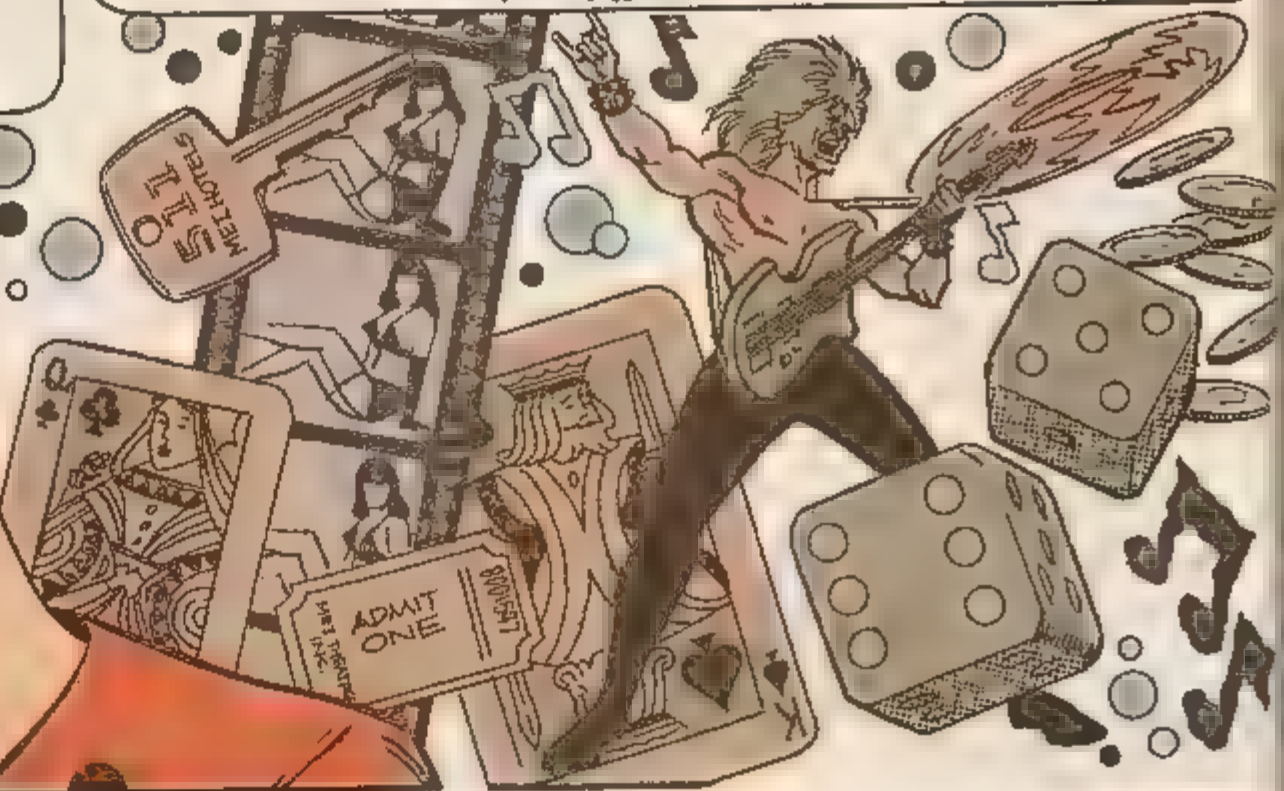
WHAT?

"MICHAEL, IN TWO YEARS MUERTA ENTERPRISES INTERNATIONAL WILL BE 100% LEGITIMATE. I'M DOING THIS FOR MY DAUGHTER, PARTIALLY, BUT ALSO BECAUSE THERE IS NO LONGER A NEED TO MAKE MONEY THE OLD WAY."



ENTERPRISES THAT BEGAN, YEARS AGO, AS MONEY-LAUNDERING OPERATIONS — FRONTS OF VARIOUS KINDS — HAVE BECOME ENORMOUSLY PROFITABLE IN THEIR OWN RIGHT.

WE HAVE AN EVER-EXPANDING INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF HOTELS, THEATERS AND LEGAL CASINOS. WE'RE IN THE BOOK AND MAGAZINE BUSINESSES, THE RECORDING BUSINESS... WE STILL TEND TO THE NEEDS OF THE CONSUMER FOR ENTERTAINMENT AND RELAXATION...

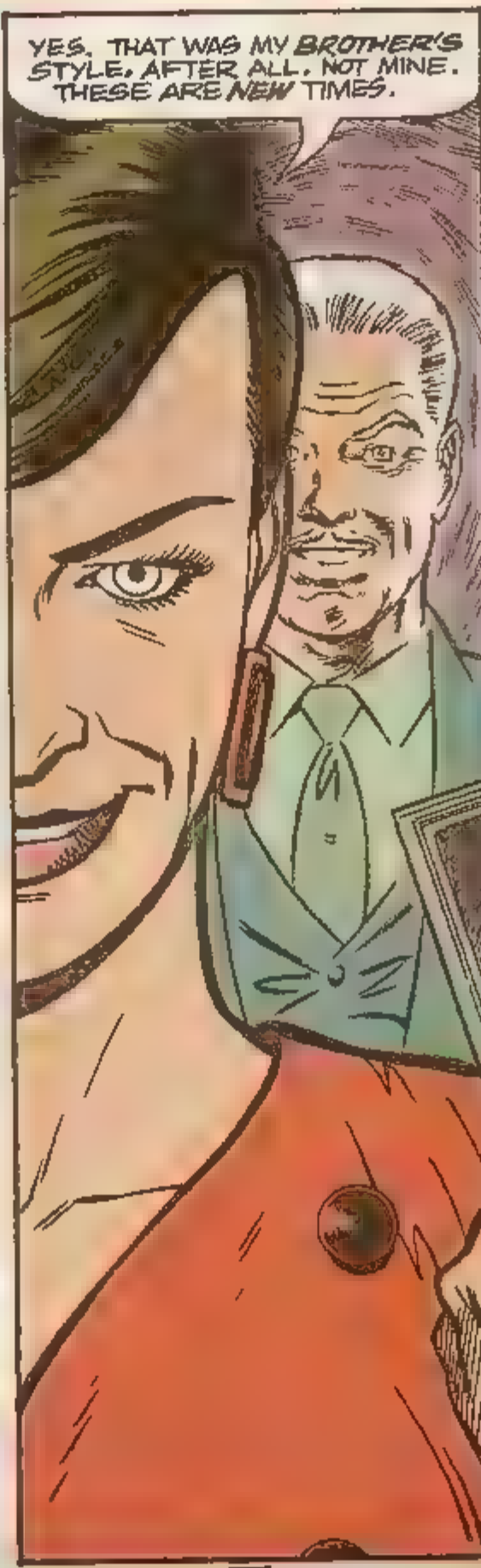


YOU'RE JUST PHASING OUT CERTAIN "ENTERTAINMENT AND RELAXATION" AREAS — LIKE PORNOGRAPHY, ILLEGAL GAMBLING AND NARCOTICS.

YES. THAT WAS MY BROTHER'S STYLE, AFTER ALL. NOT MINE. THESE ARE NEW TIMES.

AND THERE'S NO RESISTANCE IN THE RANKS?

SOME. BUT I HAVE THE FULL SUPPORT OF MY SECOND-IN-COMMAND MY NEPHEW DONALD... DONNIE IS A FINE, BRILLIANT BOY.



AND WHERE DO I FIT
INTO THESE GRANDIOSE
AND OH-SO-NOBLE PLANS?

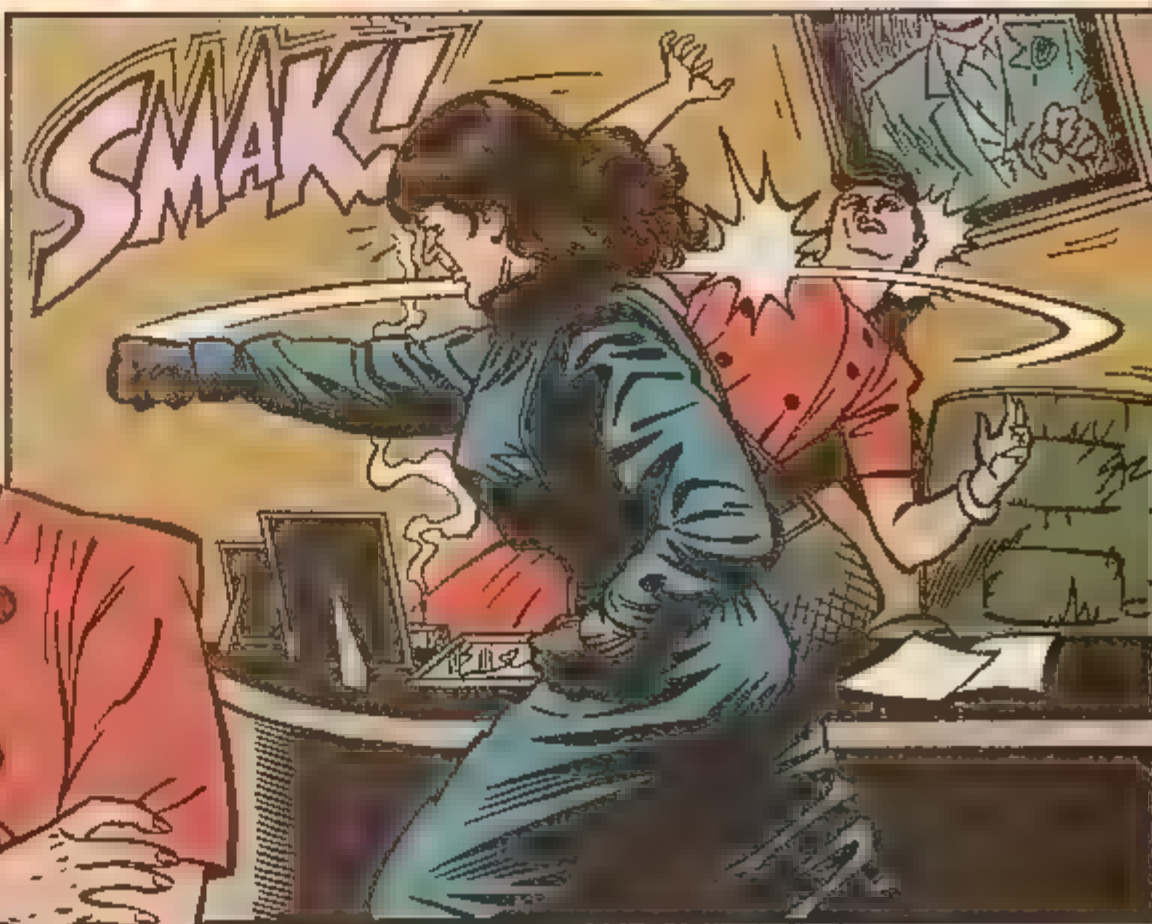
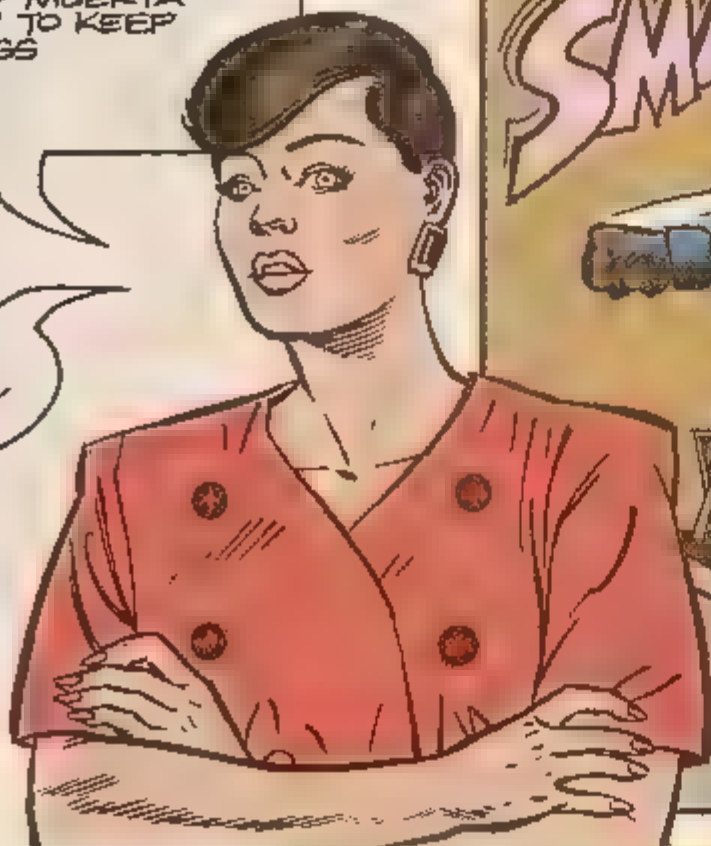
YOU SAID IT YOURSELF,
MICHAEL - MY SECURITY
"SUCKS." I NEED A NEW
HEAD OF SECURITY... AND
YOU WOULD BE IDEAL.

THE JOB WOULD PAY \$400,000
A YEAR... AND, AS YOU'D HAVE
TO CLOSE YOUR OWN AGENCY, YOU
COULD BRING YOUR FULL TREE
INVESTIGATIONS, INC. STAFF
ABOARD, AT THEIR CURRENT
SALARIES PLUS 20%.

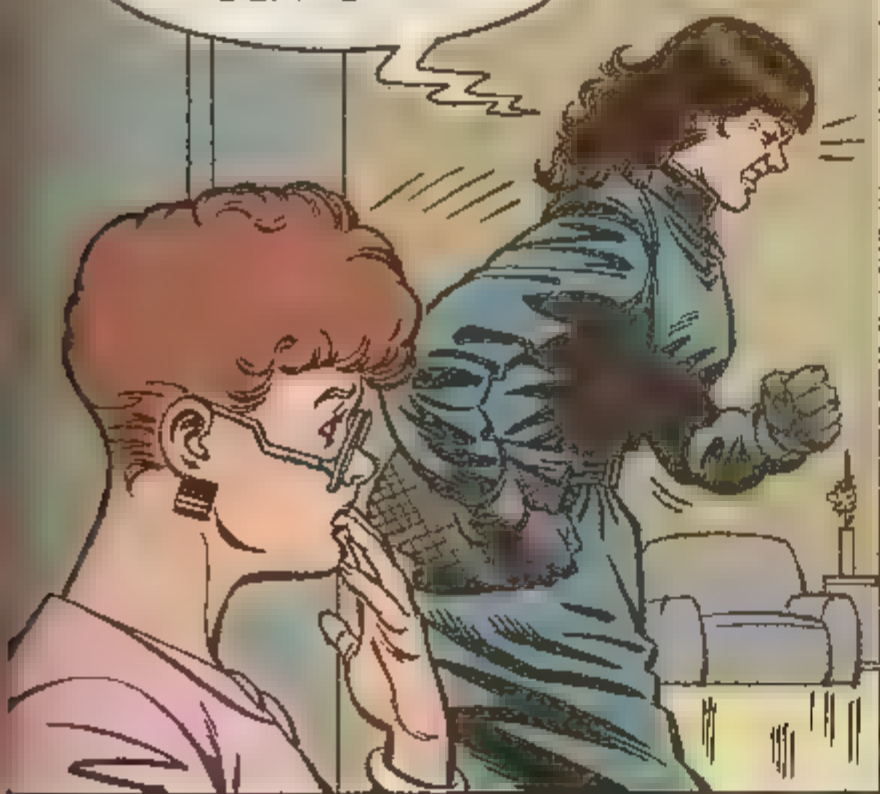


SOME DAY WE MAY BE
RELATED... BY MARRIAGE.
-S AN OLD MUERTA
TRADITION TO KEEP
THE BUSINESS
WITHIN THE
FAMILY.

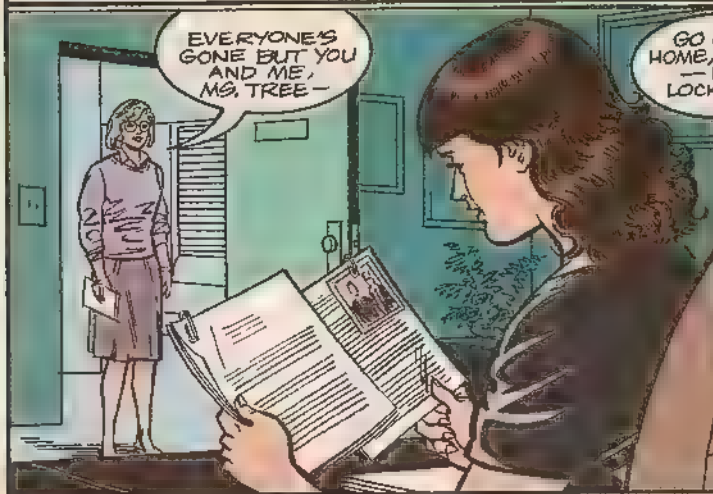
WHAT IS
YOUR
ANSWER,
MICHAEL?



Presumptuous bitch...
Sooner sleep with
a snake...



I VENTED MY ANGER THE BEST WAY I KNEW HOW:
I THREW MYSELF INTO MY WORK, BURYING
MYSELF IN ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS I'D BEEN
PUTTING OFF...



EVERYONE'S
GONE BUT YOU
AND ME,
MS. TREE—

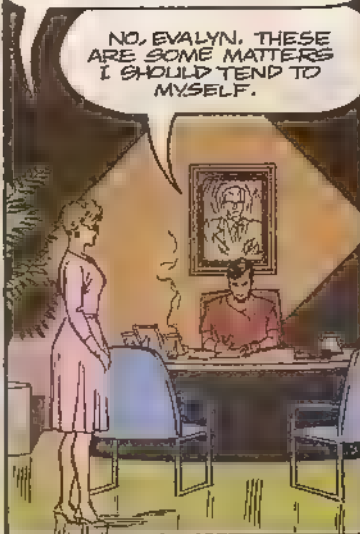
GO ON
HOME, EFFIE
—I'LL
LOCK UP.



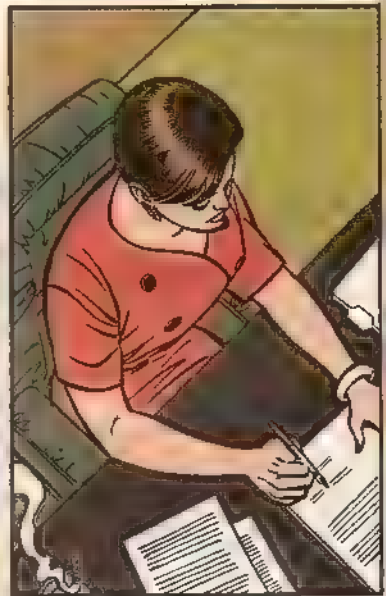
I WASN'T AWARE OF IT,
OF COURSE, BUT A
SIMILAR SCENE WAS
BEING PLAYED OUT
ELSEWHERE.



WILL YOU BE NEEDING ME
TO STAY LATE, MS. MUERTA?



NO, EVALYN. THESE
ARE SOME MATTERS
I SHOULD TEND TO
MYSELF.

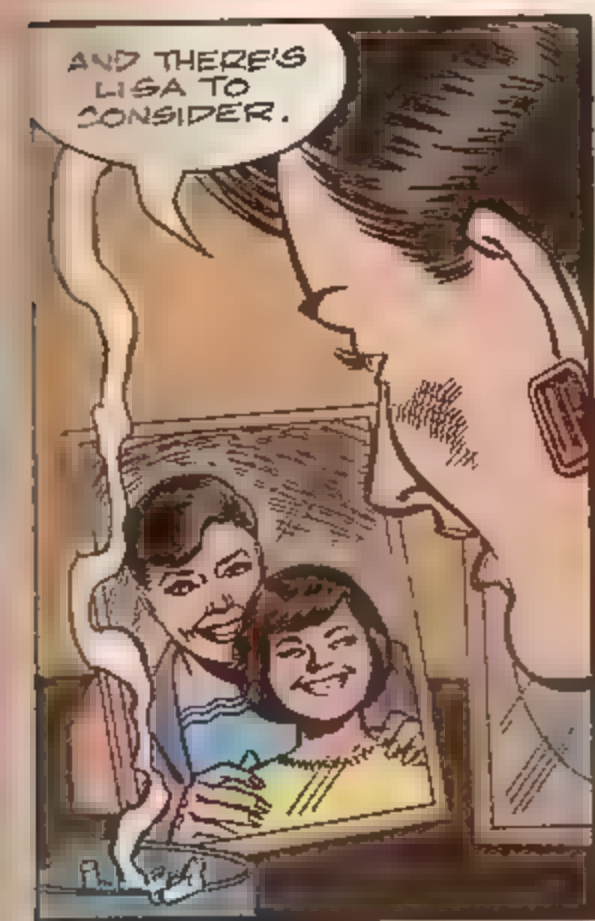
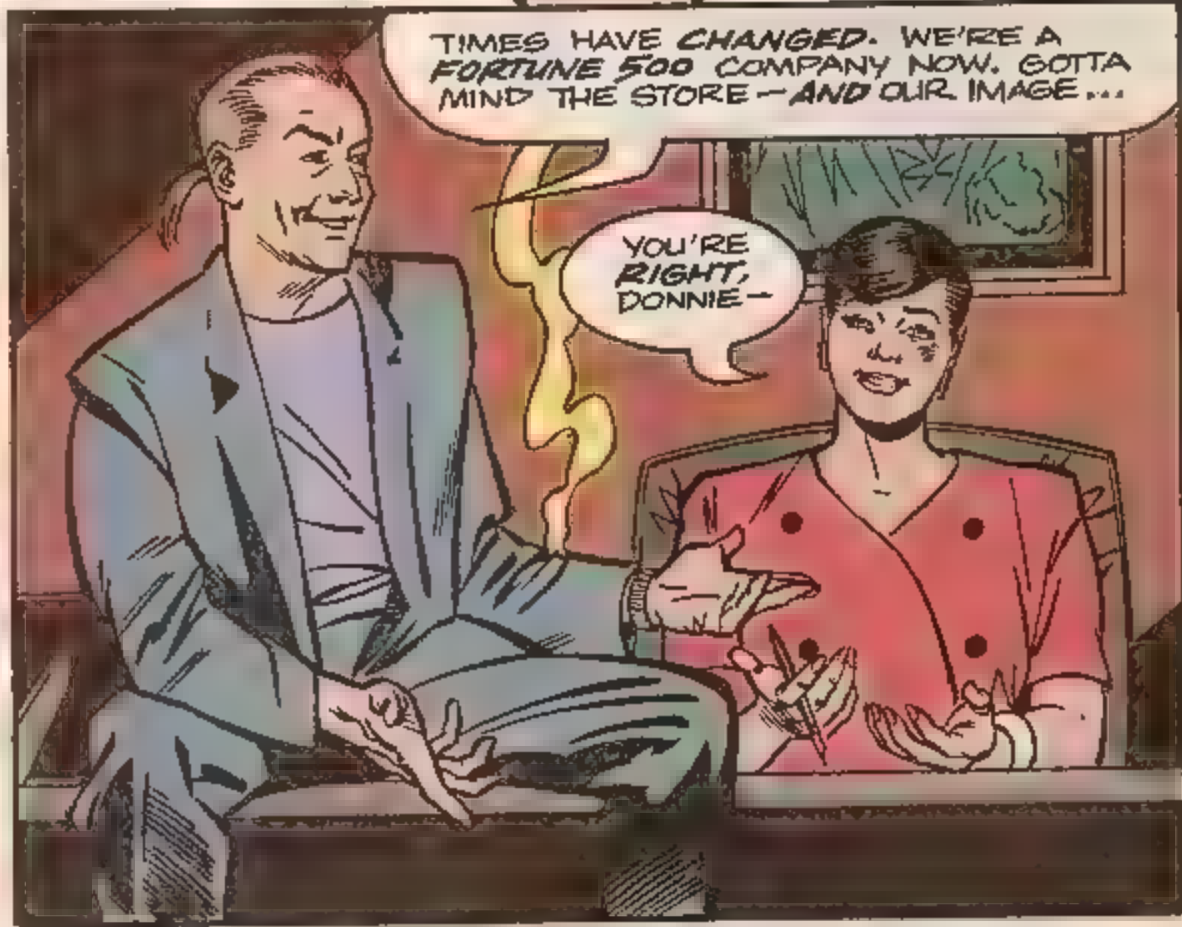


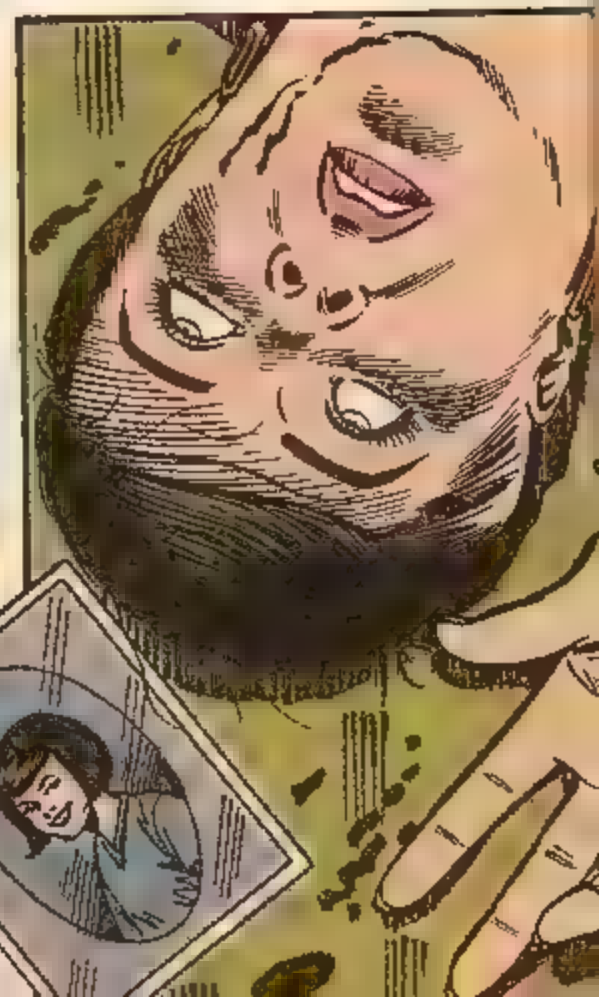
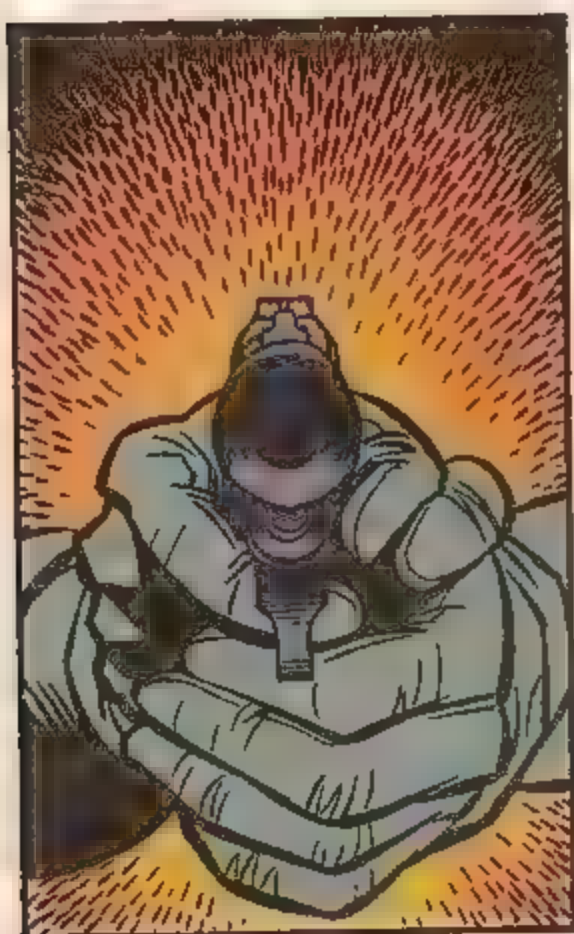
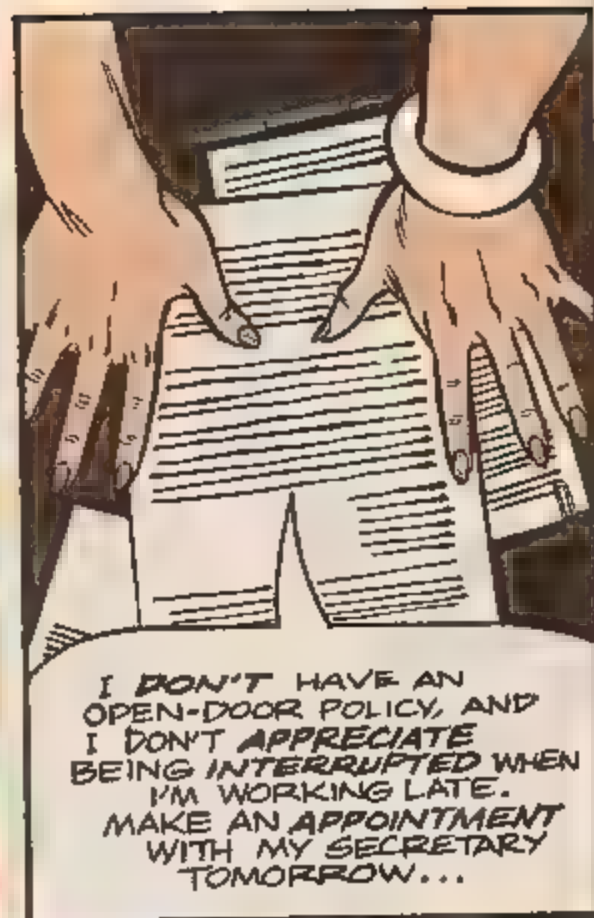
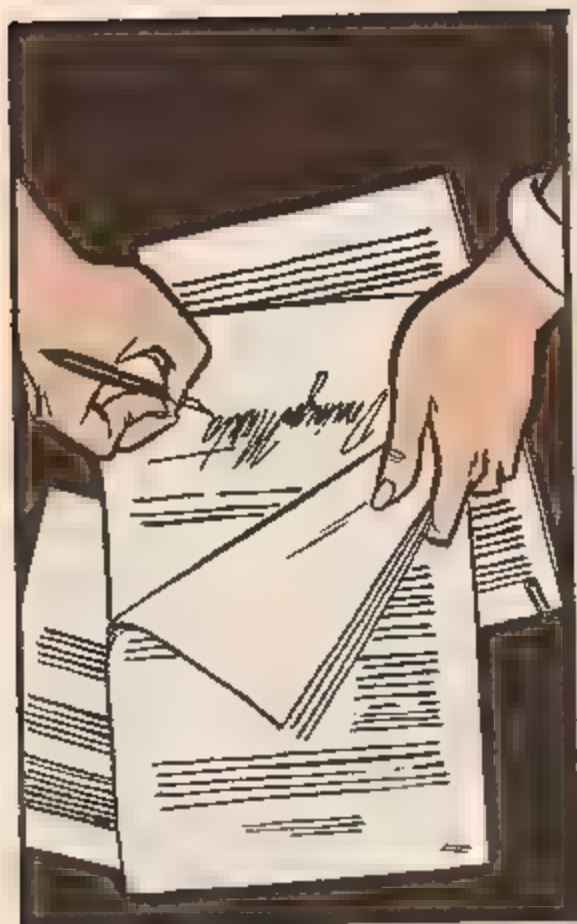
SHOWIN' THE
REST OF
US UP
AGAIN,
AUNT
DOMINIQUE?



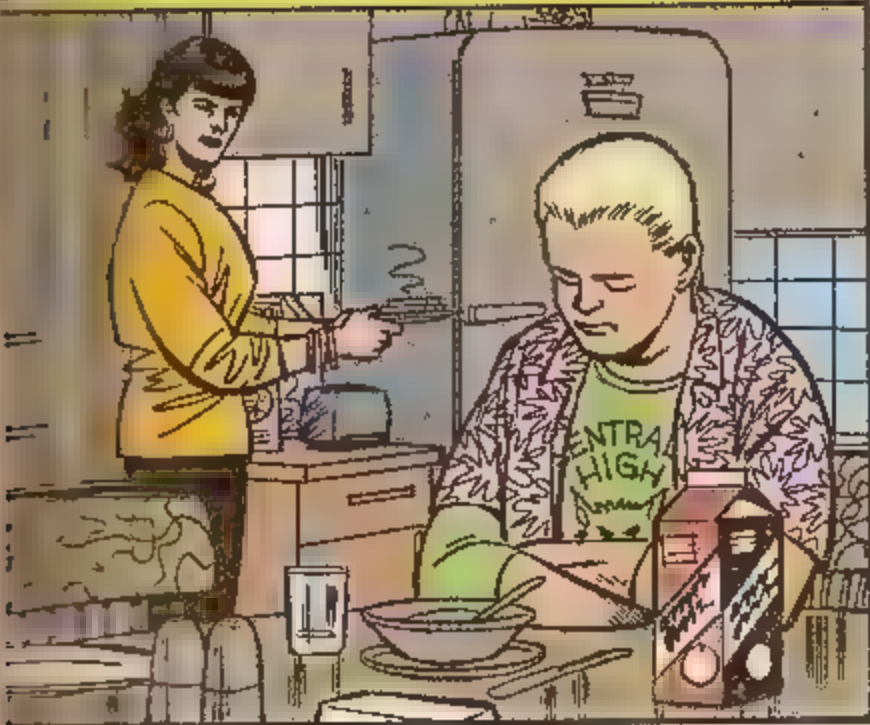
OH! DONNIE...
COME IN,
PLEASE!



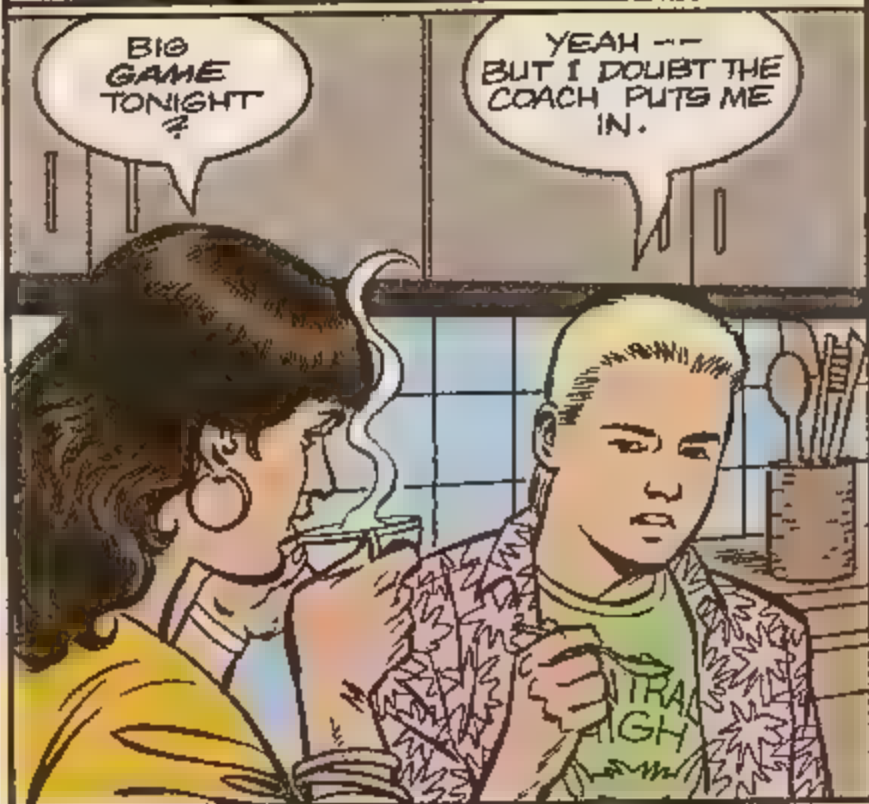




MORNING WAS ALWAYS AN AWKWARD TIME FOR MY STEPSON AND ME. WE'VE NEVER QUITE WORKED OUT HIS RESENTMENT FOR ME — THE WOMAN WHO TOOK HIS MOTHER'S PLACE IN HIS FATHER'S HEART.



THAT BOTH OF THEM WERE DEAD, AND I WAS ALL THAT WAS LEFT, DIDN'T HELP.

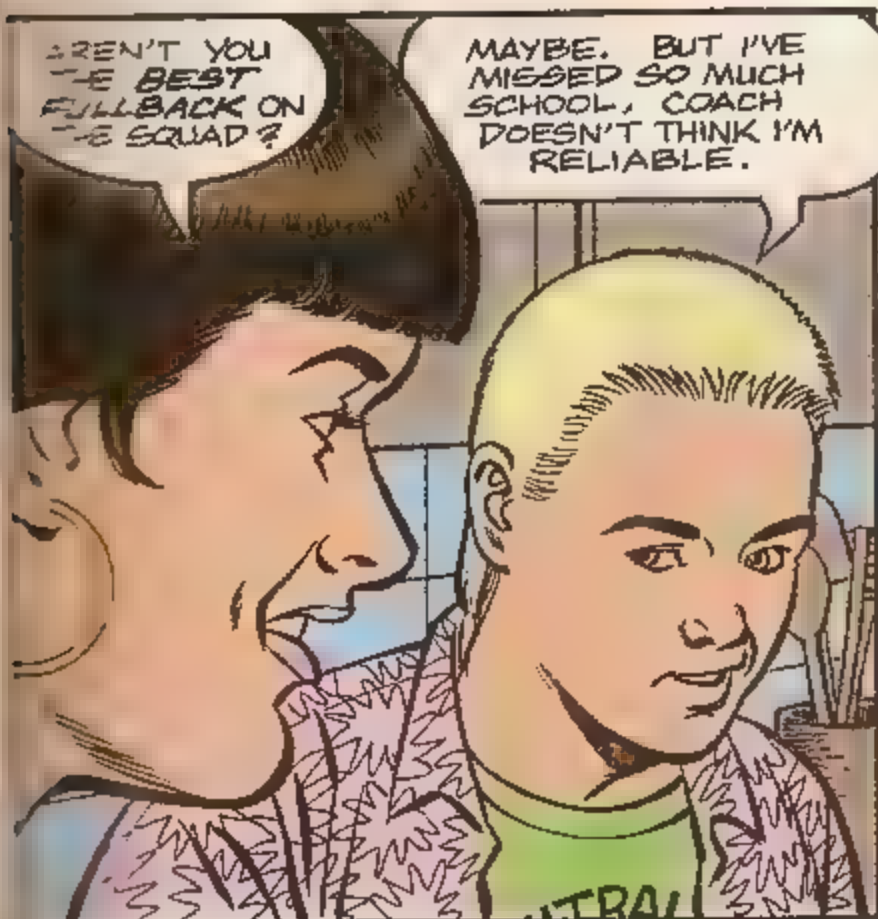


BIG GAME TONIGHT?

YEAH -- BUT I DOUBT THE COACH PUTS ME IN.

AREN'T YOU THE BEST FULLBACK ON THE SQUAD?

MAYBE. BUT I'VE MISSED SO MUCH SCHOOL, COACH DOESN'T THINK I'M RELIABLE.



I'M SORRY, MIKE. IT'S BEEN HARD -- TUTORING, PRIVATE SCHOOLS ... BUT WE'VE BEEN ON THE FIRING LINE, YOU AND ME.

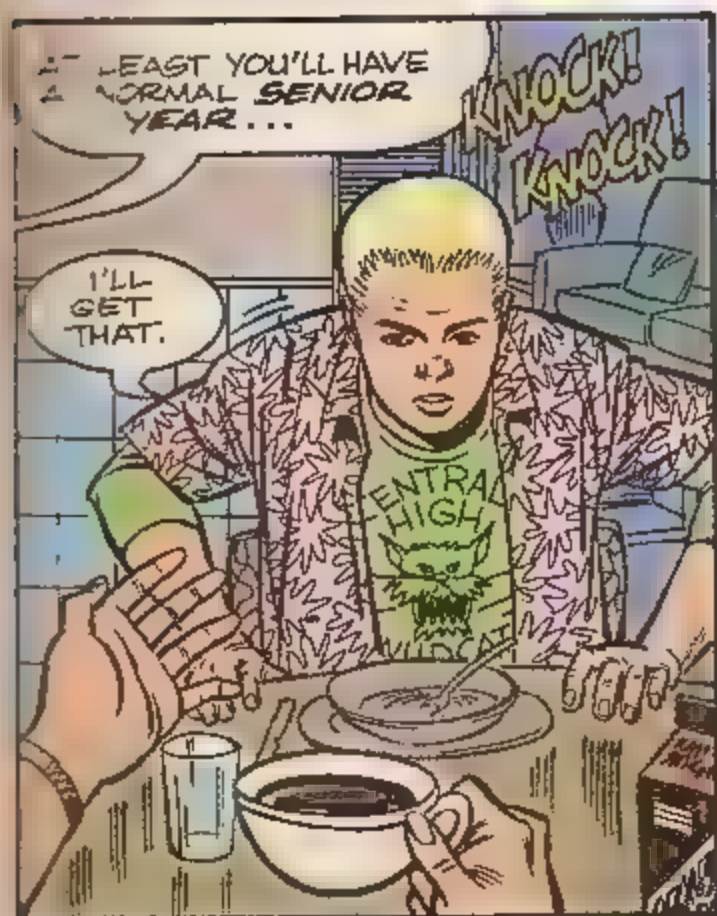
I KNOW.



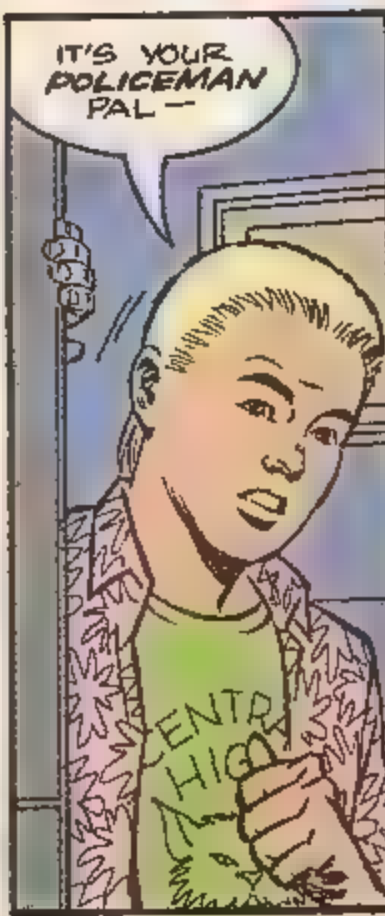
AT LEAST YOU'LL HAVE A NORMAL SENIOR YEAR...

I'LL GET THAT.

KNOCK! KNOCK!



IT'S YOUR POLICEMAN PAL --



RAFE -- IT'S A LITTLE EARLY, ISN'T IT?

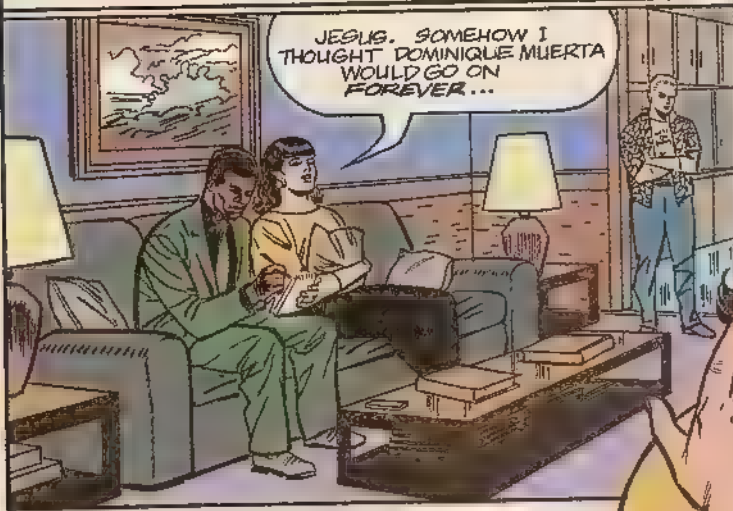
NEVER TOO EARLY FOR HOMICIDE, MICHAEL --



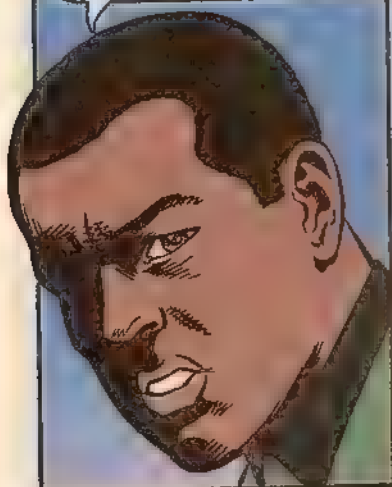
A MAINTENANCE MAN HAD FOUND DOMINIQUE'S BODY. NO WITNESSES HAD SEEN ANYTHING RELATING TO THE AFTER-HOURS SHOOTING.

AM I YOUR PRIME SUSPECT? I HAD A HELL OF A HISTORY WITH HER... NOT TO MENTION PUNCHING HER LIGHTS OUT YESTERDAY.

JESUS. SOMEHOW I THOUGHT DOMINIQUE MUERTA WOULD GO ON FOREVER...



WE KNOW ALL ABOUT THAT LITTLE INCIDENT. SHE WAS KILLED IN HER OFFICE, WHERE YOU FOUGHT.



WE DIDN'T "FIGHT." I DECKED HER. ESTIMATED TIME OF DEATH?



SEVEN-THIRTY P.M. YOU HAVE AN ALIBI?

NO.



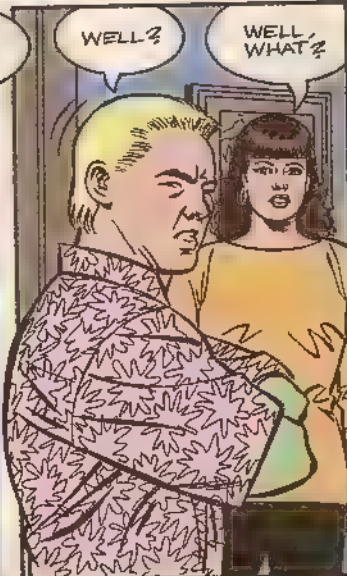
COME DOWN TODAY, AT YOUR CONVENIENCE. WE'LL NEED A STATEMENT.

YOU'LL GET ONE.

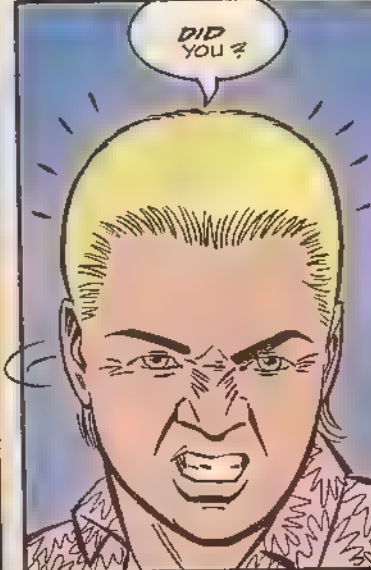


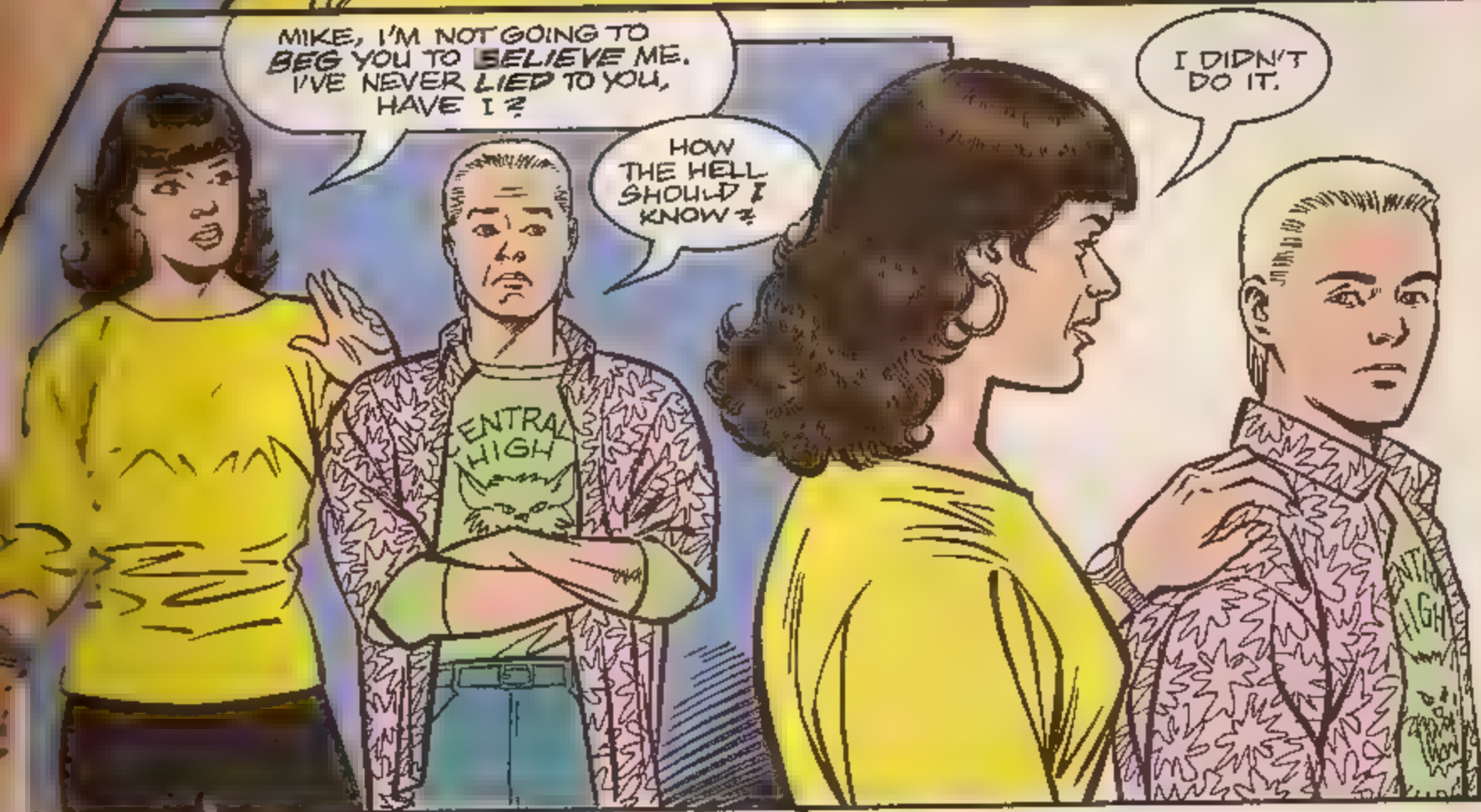
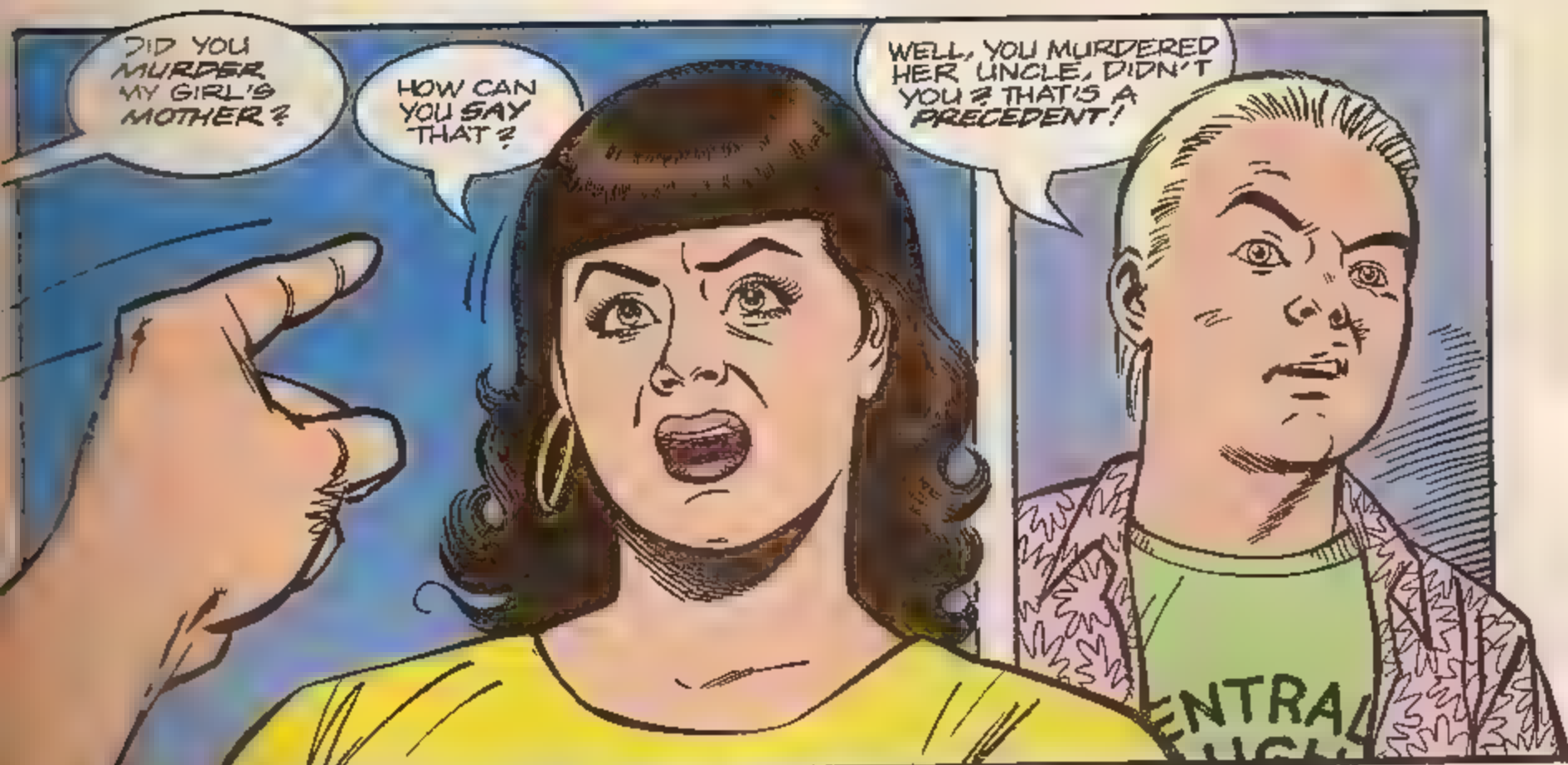
WELL?

WELL, WHAT?



DID YOU?





VISITATION TO PAY LAST RESPECTS TO DOMINIQUE MUERTA WAS AT A SUBURBAN FUNERAL HOME THE NEXT AFTERNOON.



LADY,
YOU GOTTA BE
KIDDING.



I'M NOT HERE TO CAUSE
TROUBLE. I'M HERE OUT OF
COURTESY TO THE FAMILY OF
A FALLEN ADVERSARY.

step
aside -



YOU'RE NOT
WELCOME
HERE.

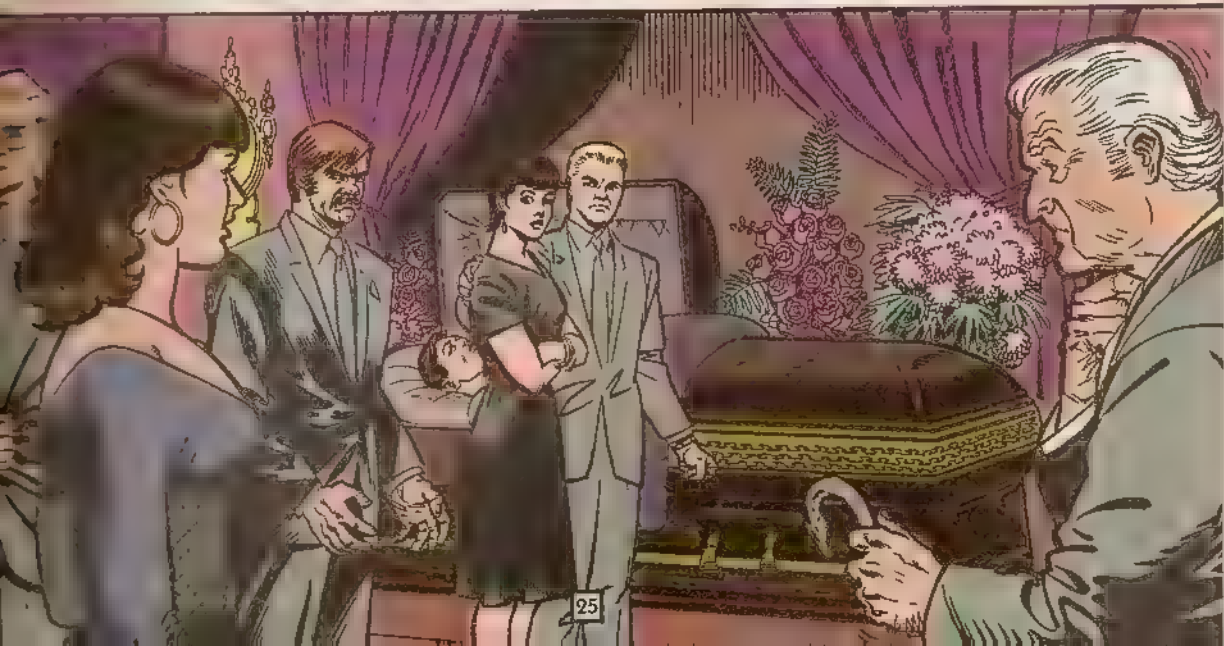
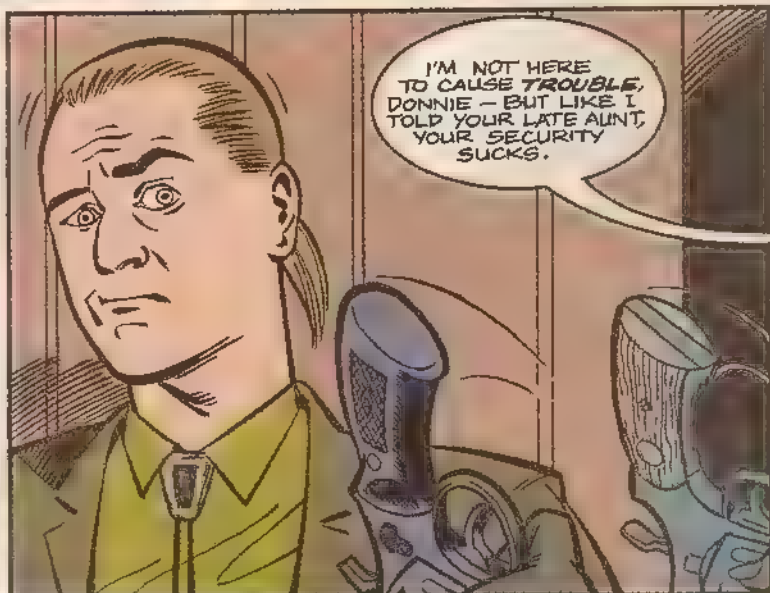


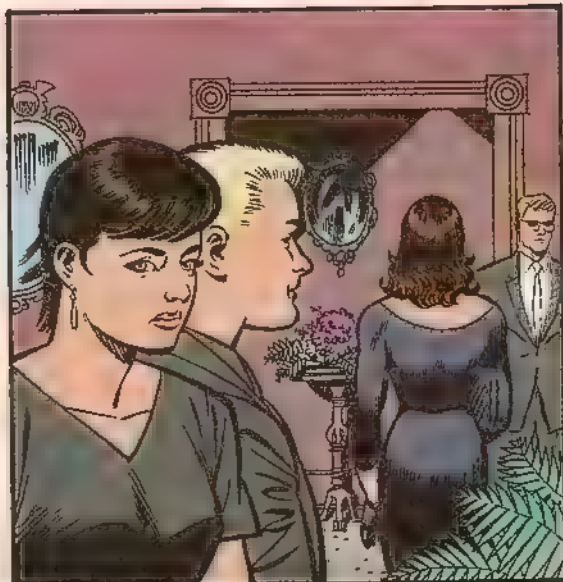
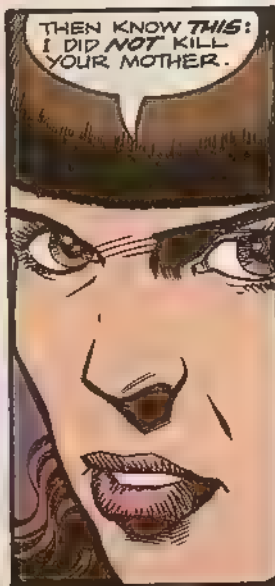
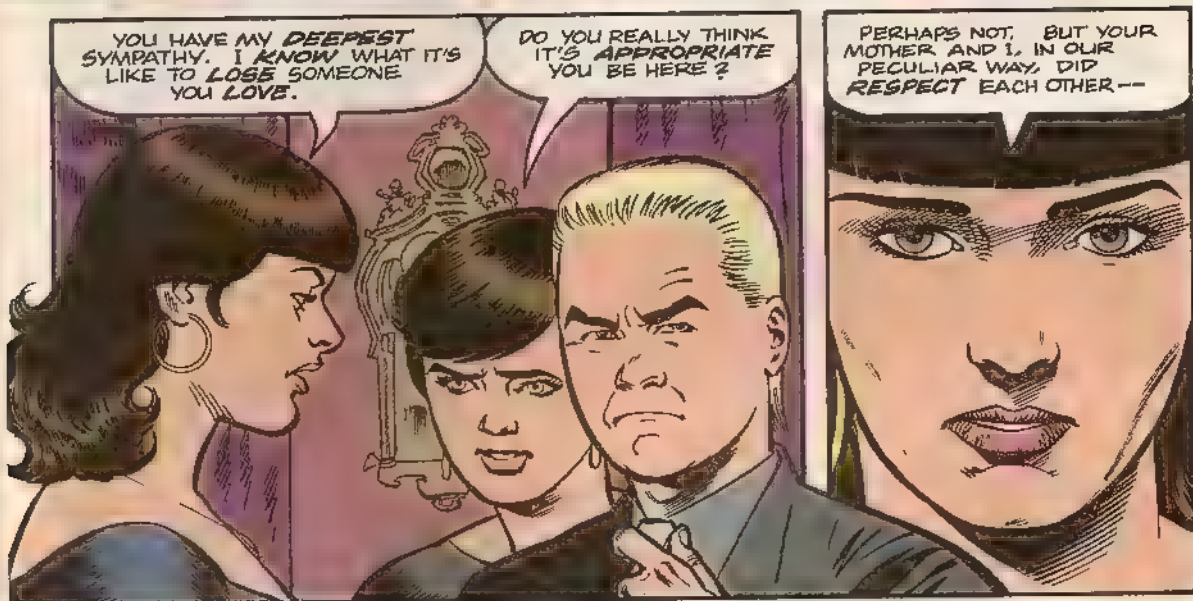
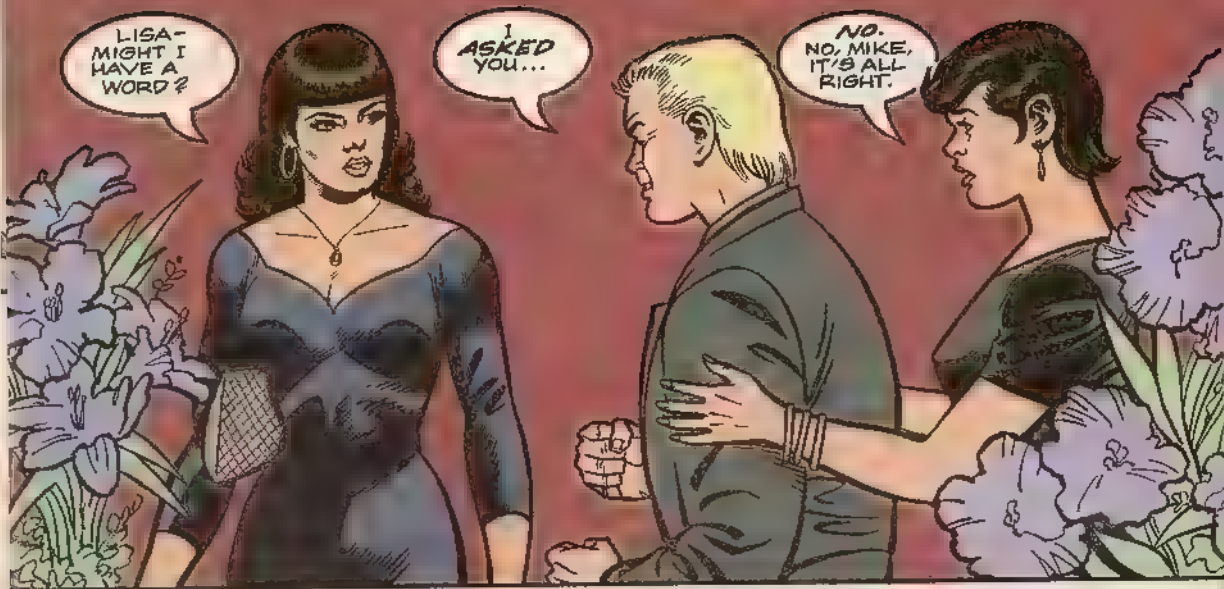
YOU KNOW,
THEY WON'T
HAVE FAR TO
TAKE YOU WHEN
I'M FINISHED
WITH YOU.

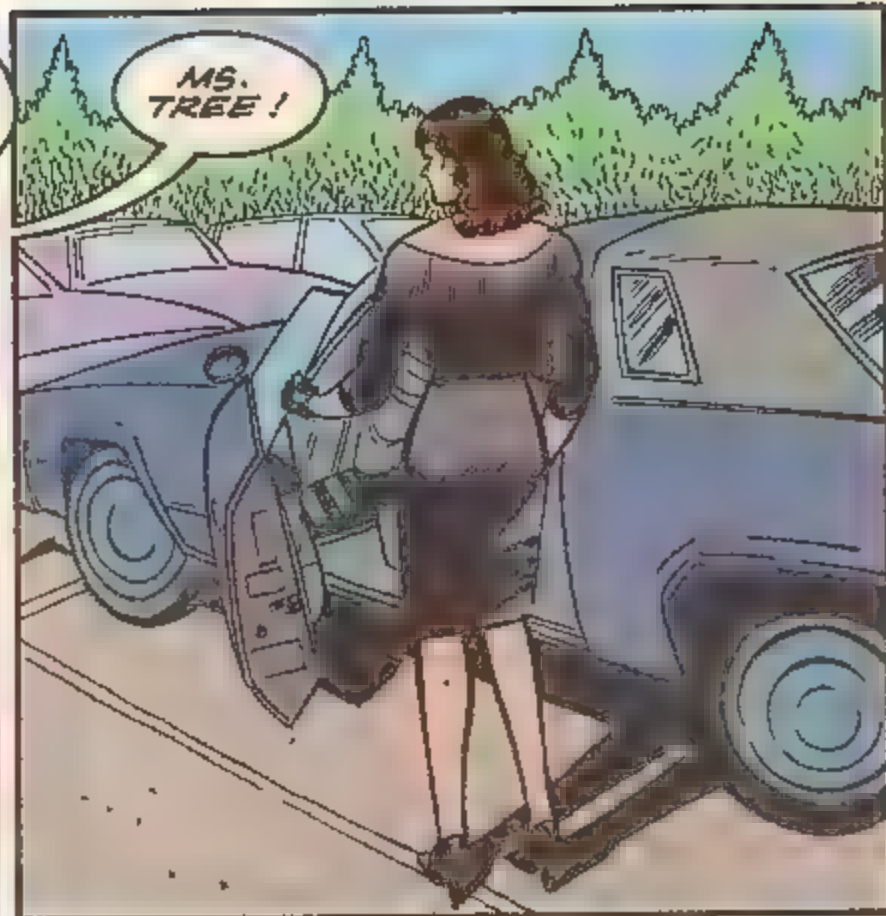


YOU DON'T
SCARE ME,
HONEY.









SHE WAS PREPARED TO PAY—SHE WAS A WEALTHY YOUNG WOMAN, AFTER ALL.

NAME YOUR PRICE.

IT'S NOT MONEYARY, LISA.

I WANT YOU TO PROMISE ME THAT YOU AND MIKE WON'T DO ANYTHING RASH—

NO KNEEJERK ELOPEMENT—I DON'T WANT A SON WHO GOES ON HIS HONEYMOON BEFORE HE GOES TO THE PROM.

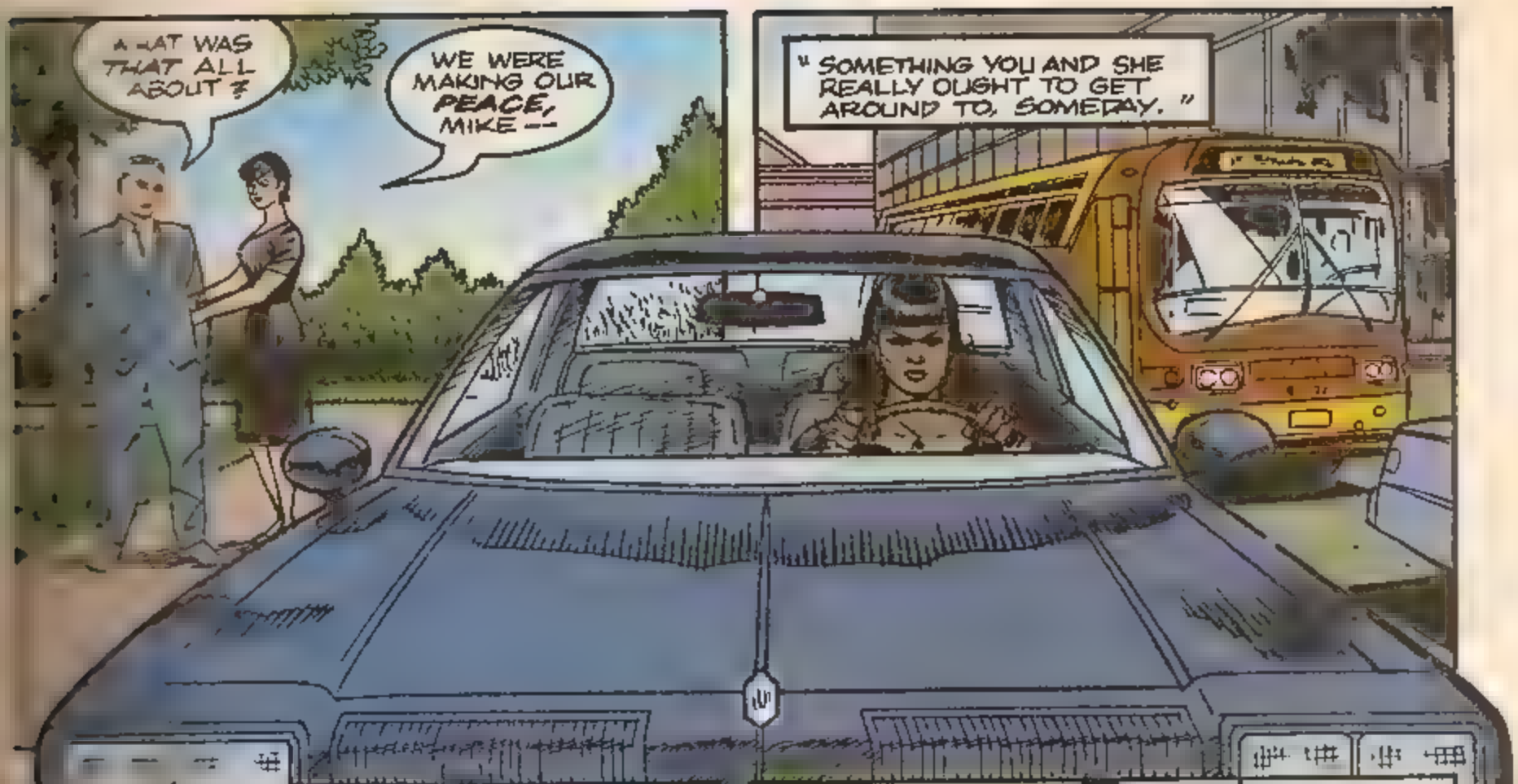
YOU STRIKE A HARD BARGAIN—BUT AGREED.

AND LISA—NOT A WORD OF THIS TO ANYONE—

"... NOT MIKE, OR ESPECIALLY YOUR UNCLE DONNIE —"

WHY?

THIS IS A JOB I CAN DO BEST FROM THE INSIDE—SO THIS IS OUR SECRET.



WHAT WAS THAT ALL ABOUT?

WE WERE MAKING OUR PEACE, MIKE --

"SOMETHING YOU AND SHE REALLY OUGHT TO GET AROUND TO, SOMEDAY."

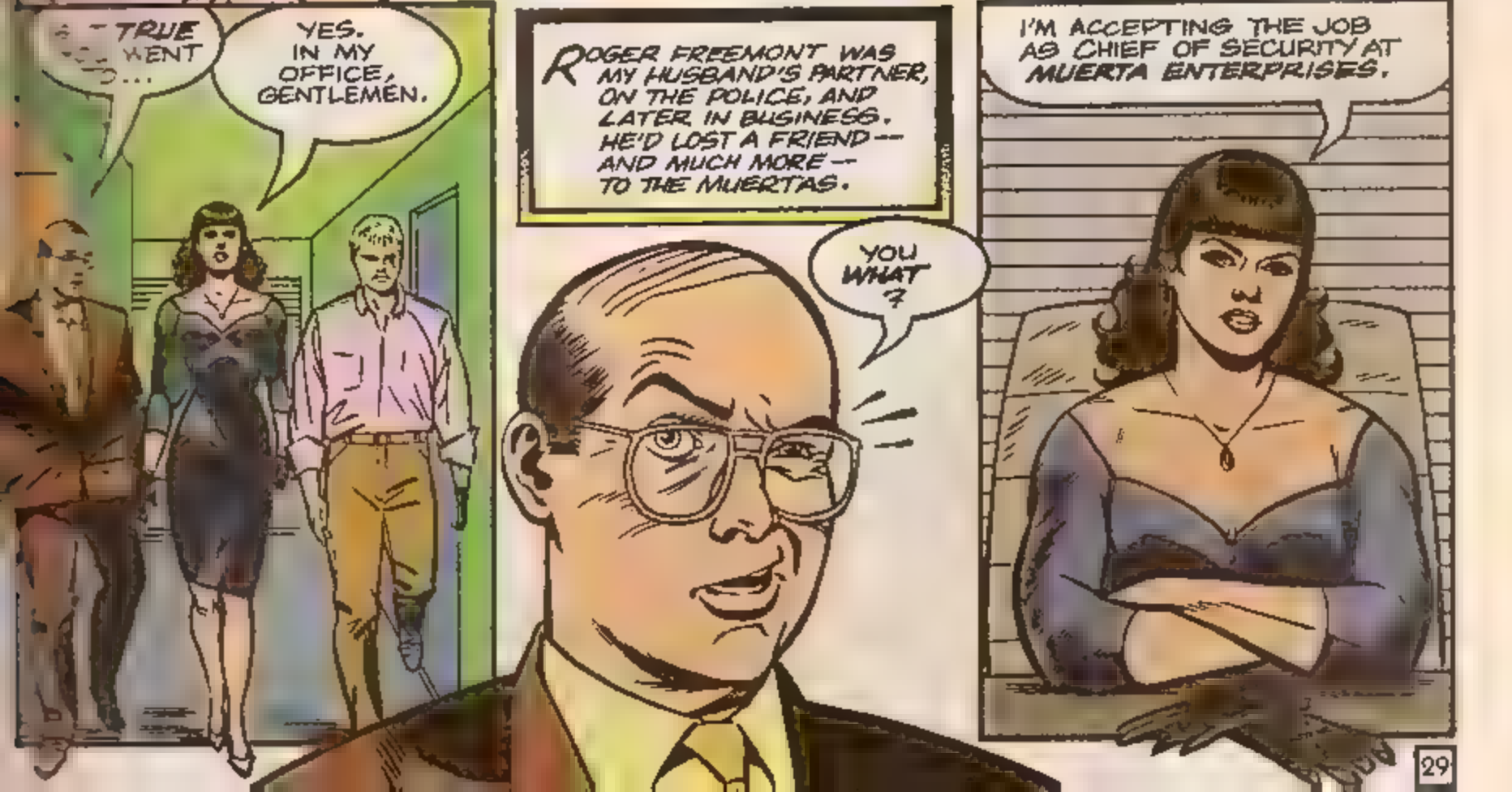


THE TREE -- WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?

DOMINIQUE MUERTA'S FUNERAL..

DAN GREEN IS ALWAYS THERE FOR ME, TO LEND A HAND -- LITERALLY, IN ONE CASE, THANKS TO THE MUERTAS.

SOUNDS LIKE FUN.



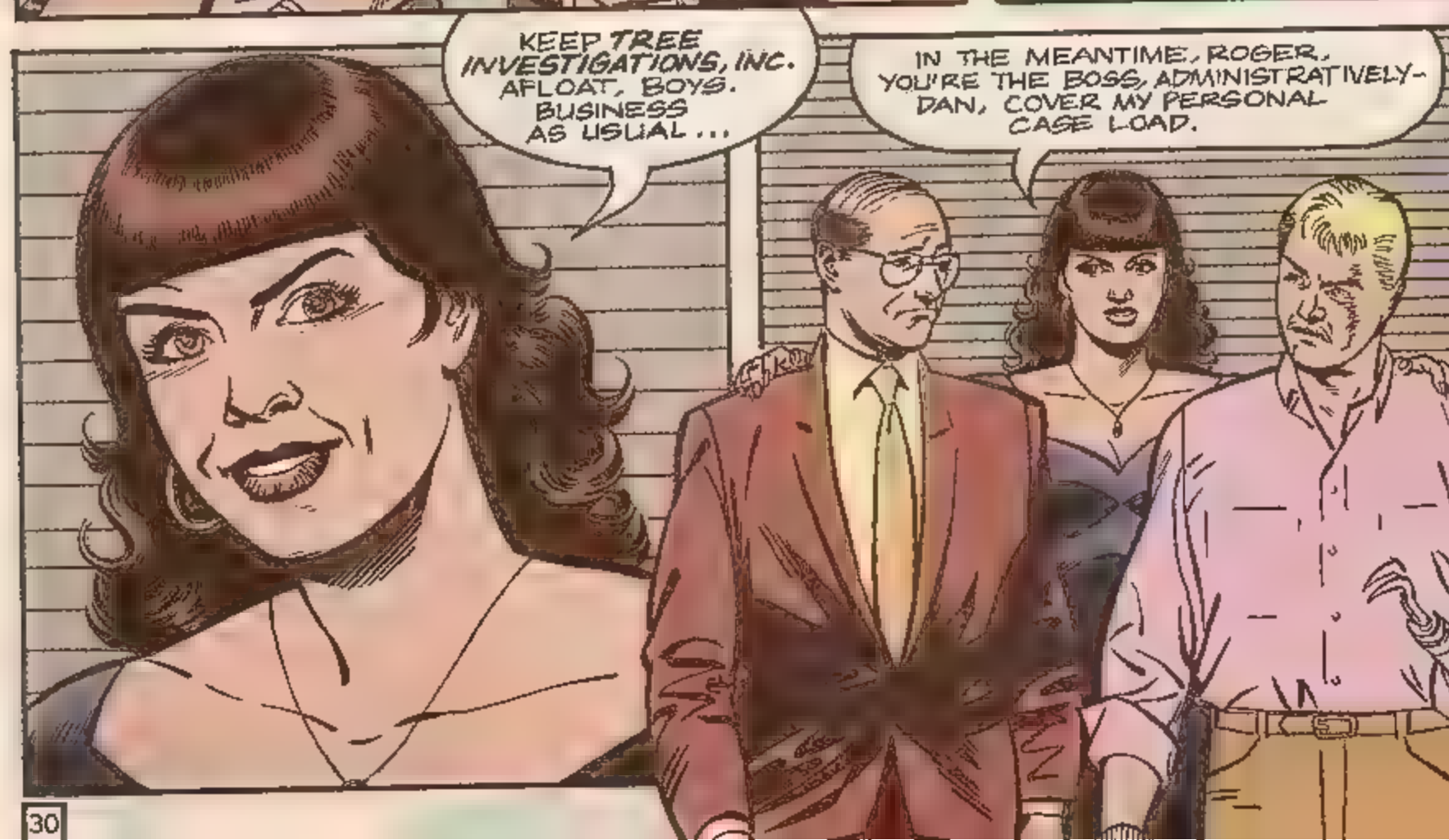
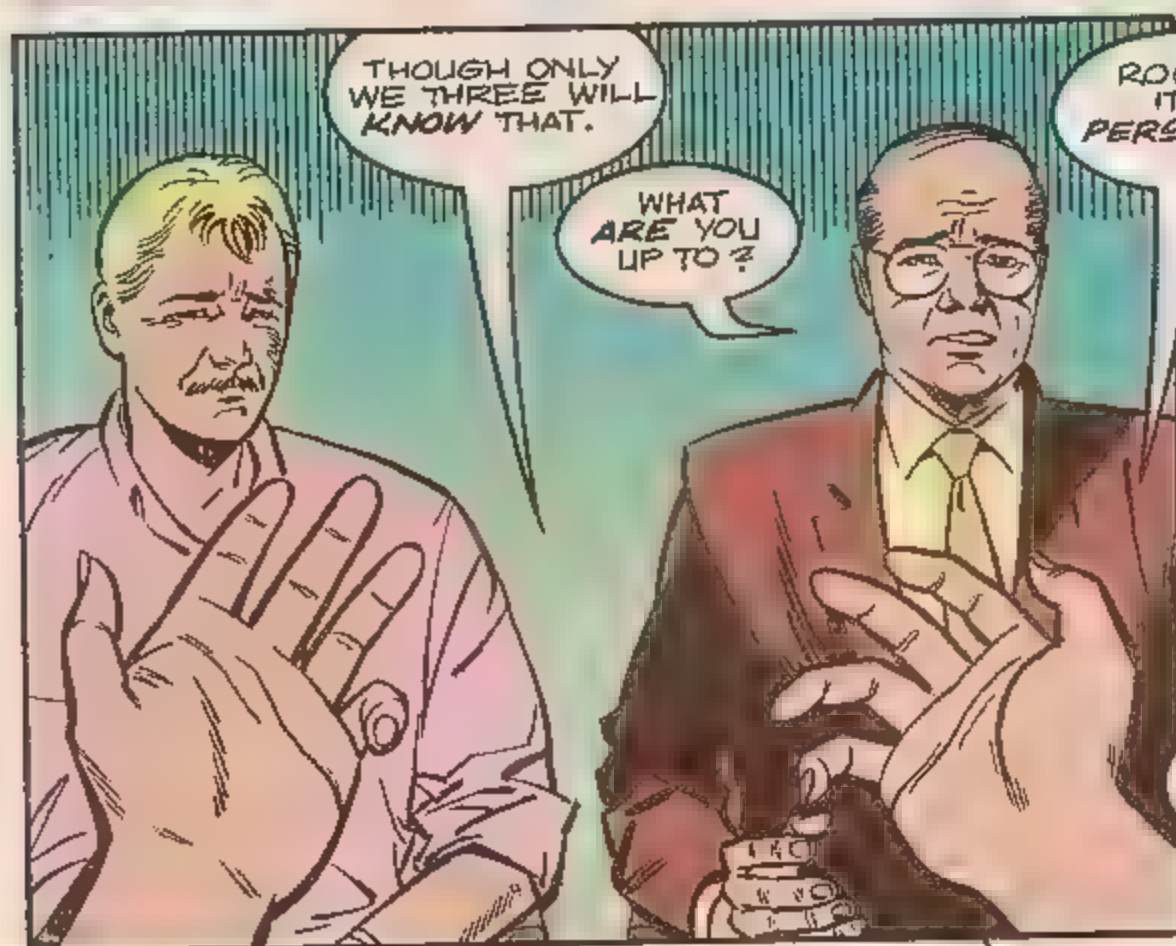
TRUE WENT

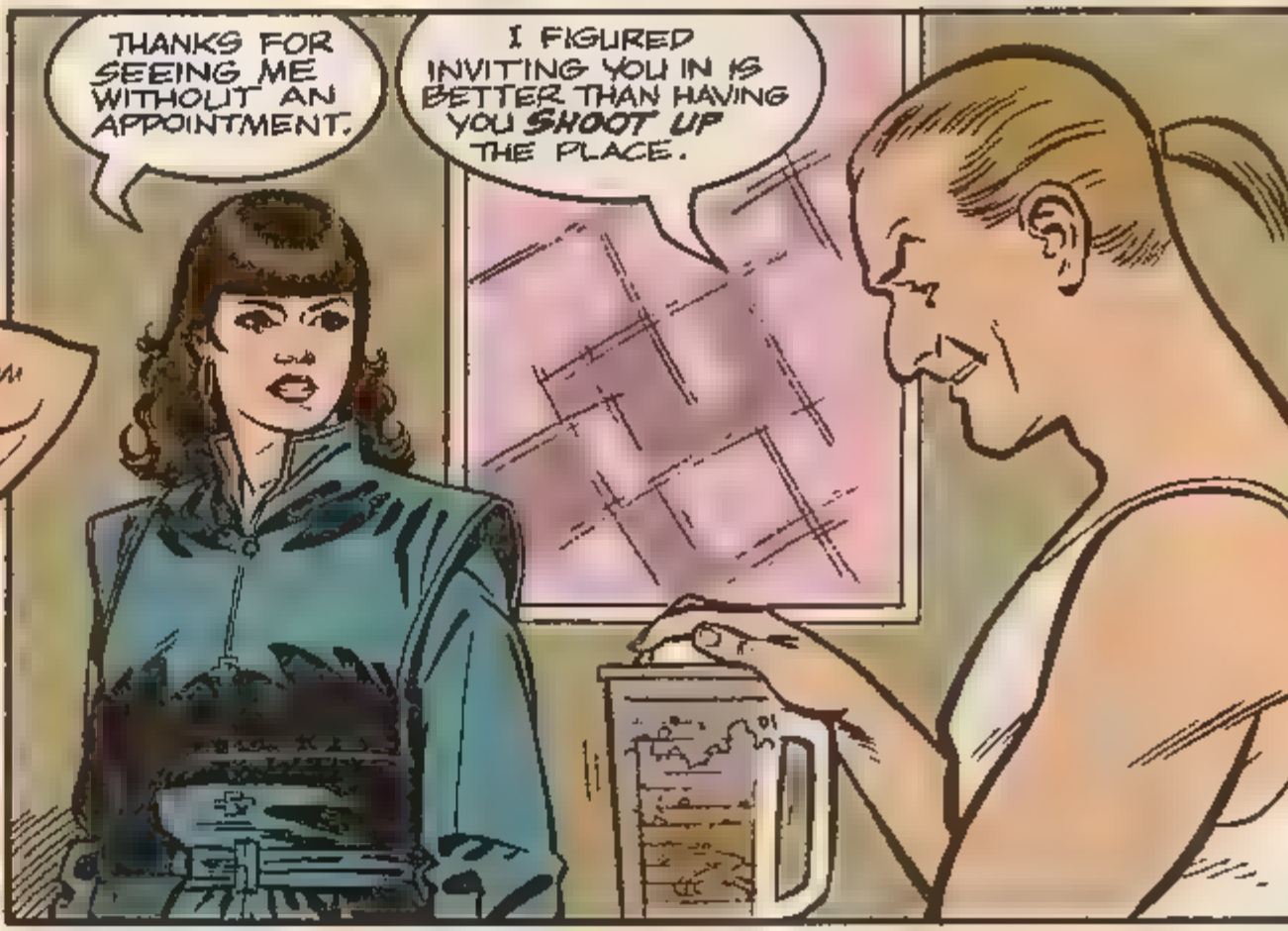
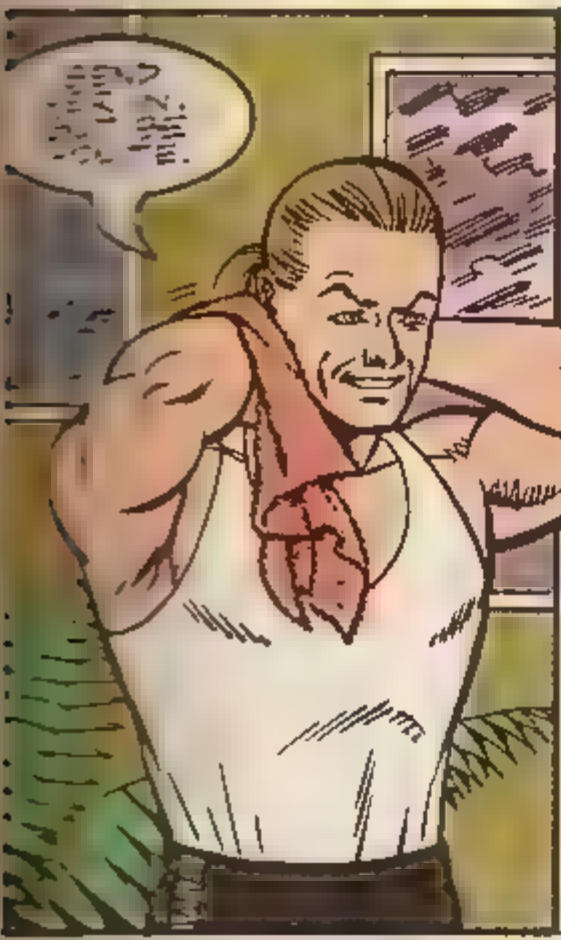
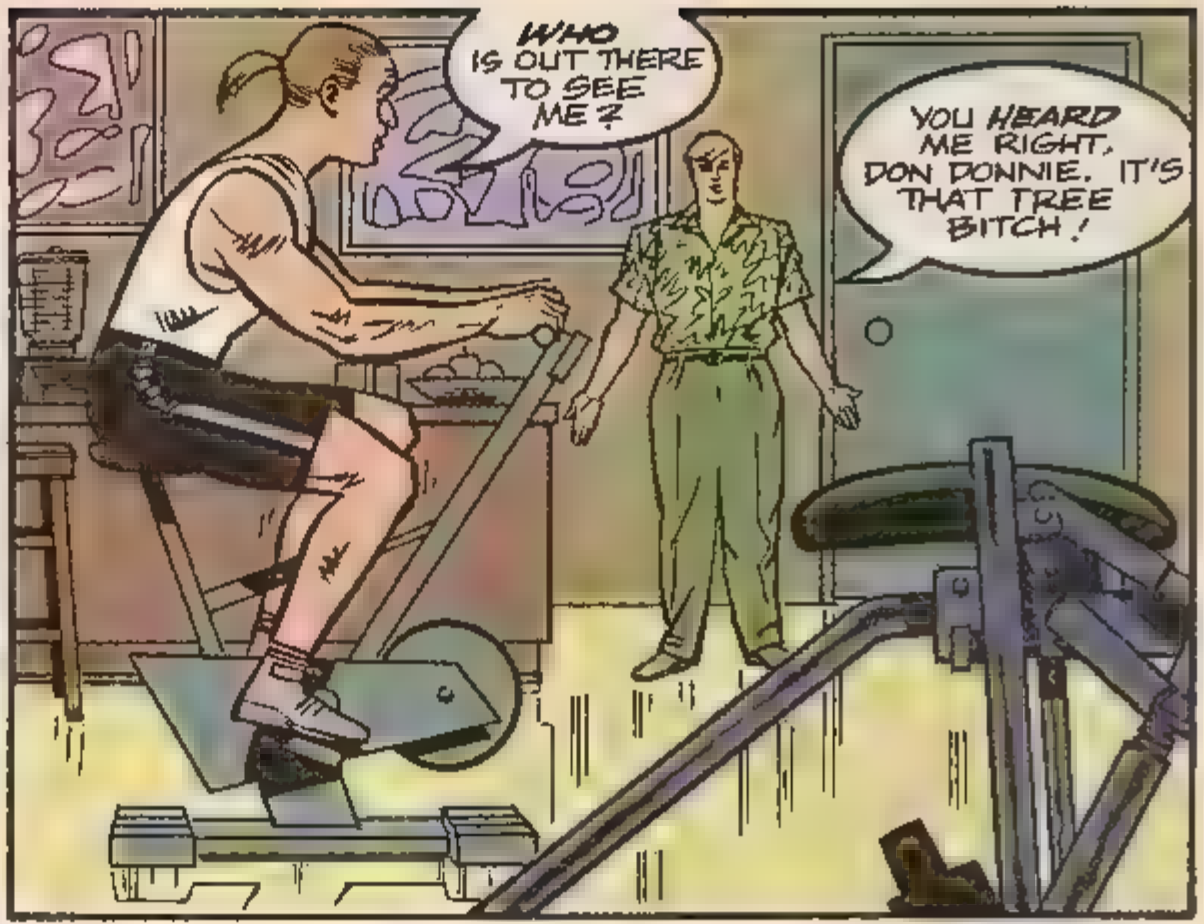
YES. IN MY OFFICE, GENTLEMEN.

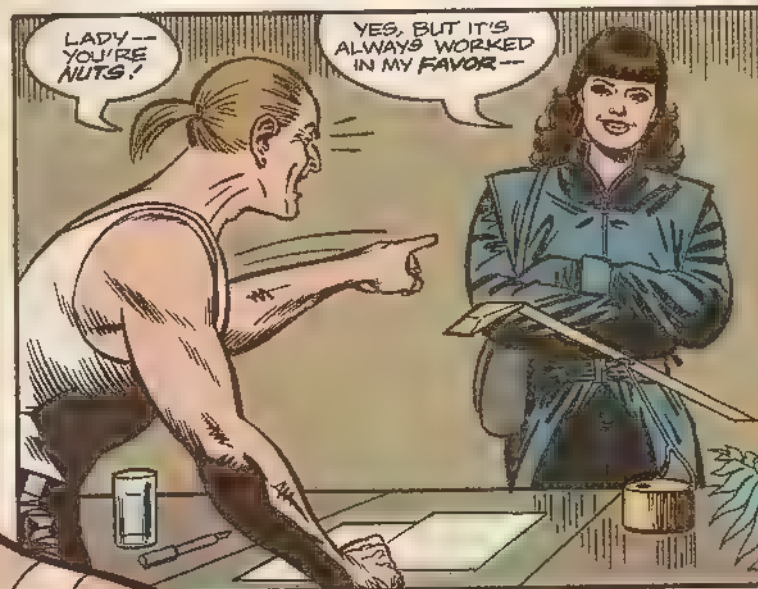
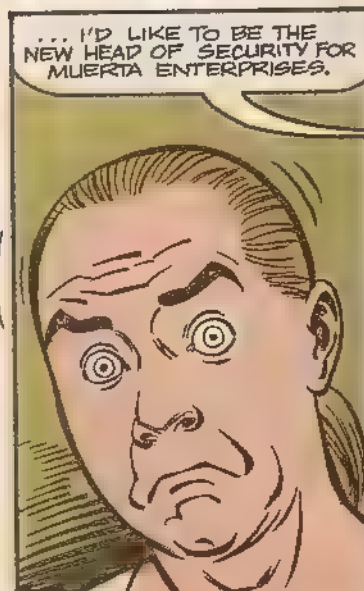
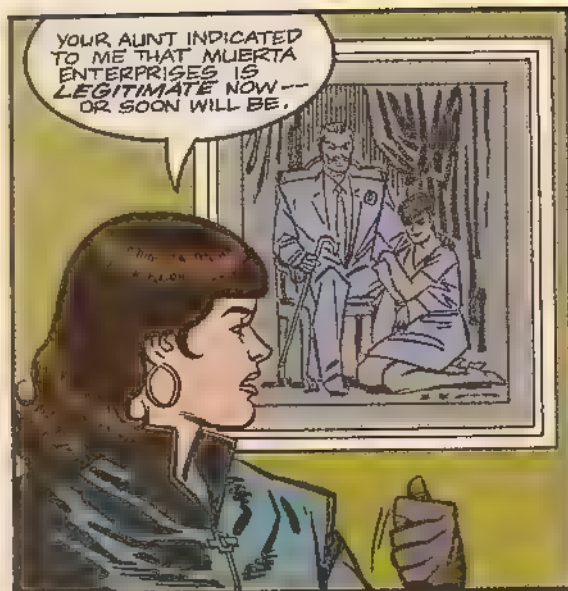
ROGER FREEMONT WAS MY HUSBAND'S PARTNER, ON THE POLICE, AND LATER IN BUSINESS. HE'D LOST A FRIEND -- AND MUCH MORE -- TO THE MUERTAS.

YOU WHAT?

I'M ACCEPTING THE JOB AS CHIEF OF SECURITY AT MUERTA ENTERPRISES.









YOU WANT TO
LOOK RESPECTABLE?
THINK OF THE POSITIVE P.R.
YOU CAN GENERATE BY
HAVING ME
ABOARD!

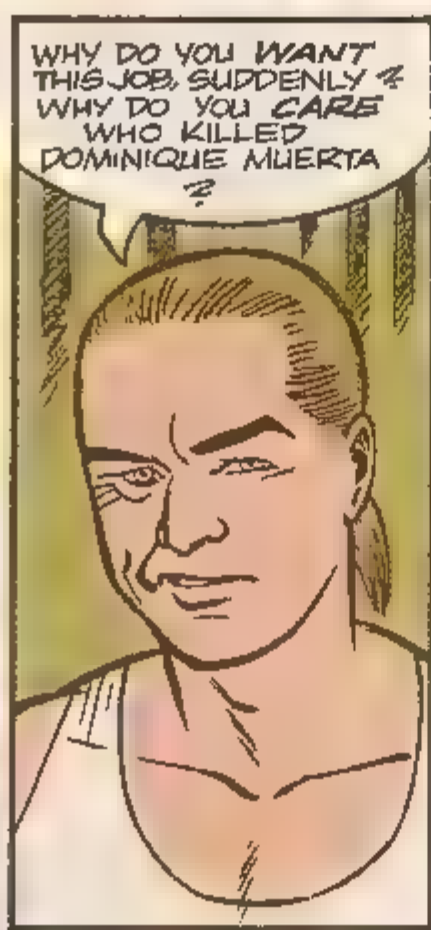


"YOU AND I BOTH KNOW THAT YOUR
AUNT WAS KILLED BY SOMEBODY
ON THE INSIDE OF M.E.I. --"

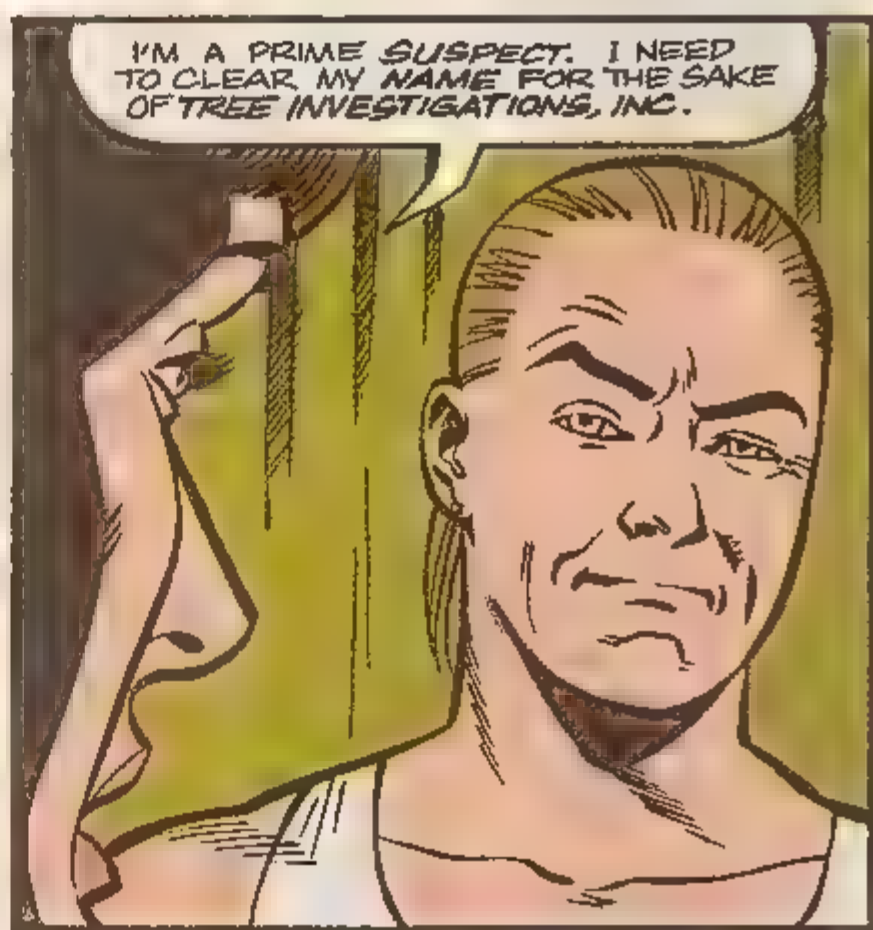
"YOU'LL FIND MY AUNT'S KILLER?"



AS HEAD OF
SECURITY, IT WOULD
BE MY TOP
PRIORITY.



WHY DO YOU WANT
THIS JOB, SUDDENLY?
WHY DO YOU CARE
WHO KILLED
DOMINIQUE MUERTA
?



I'M A PRIME SUSPECT. I NEED
TO CLEAR MY NAME FOR THE SAKE
OF TREE INVESTIGATIONS, INC.

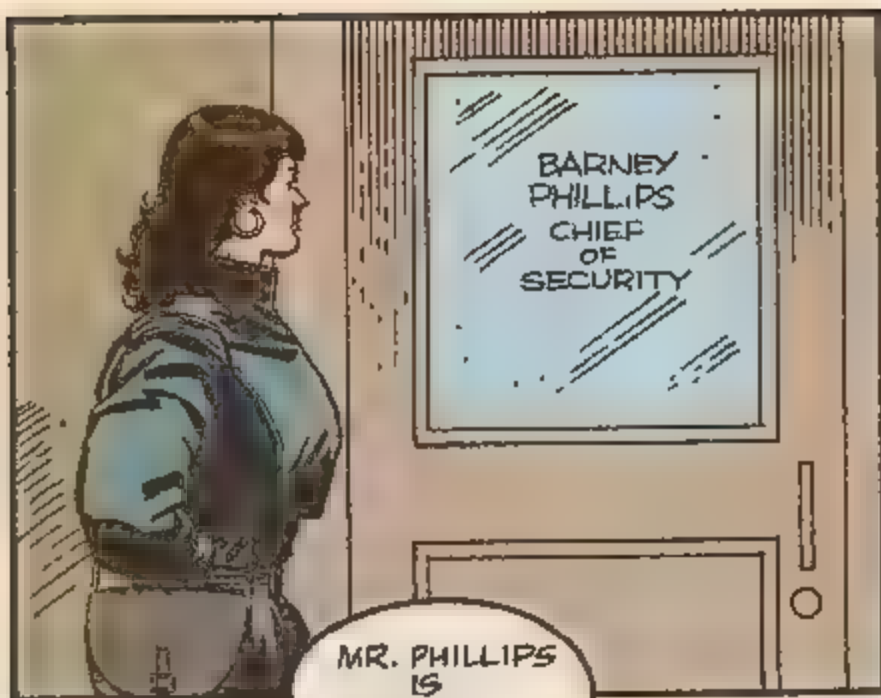


THEN YOU
COULDN'T SHUT
OUR AGENCY
DOWN?

HARDLY. YOU'RE A CLIENT.
TAKING ON A SECURITY JOB OF THIS
SIZE WOULD OPEN NEW DOORS
FOR US... WE COULD GO
NATIONAL.

YOU'VE GOT A GOOD HEAD
FOR BUSINESS, MS. TREE.
I LIKE THAT. YOU'RE HIRED.
I'll just make a call...

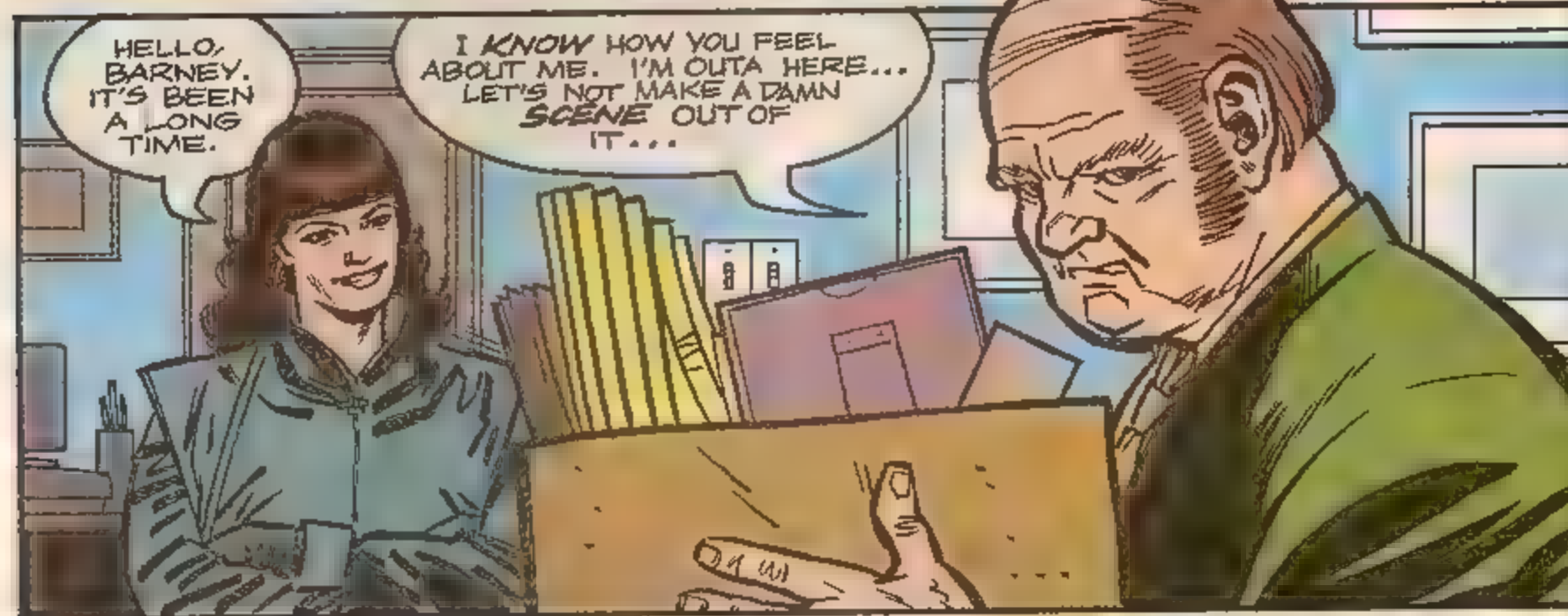




MR. PHILLIPS
IS
EXPECTING
YOU...

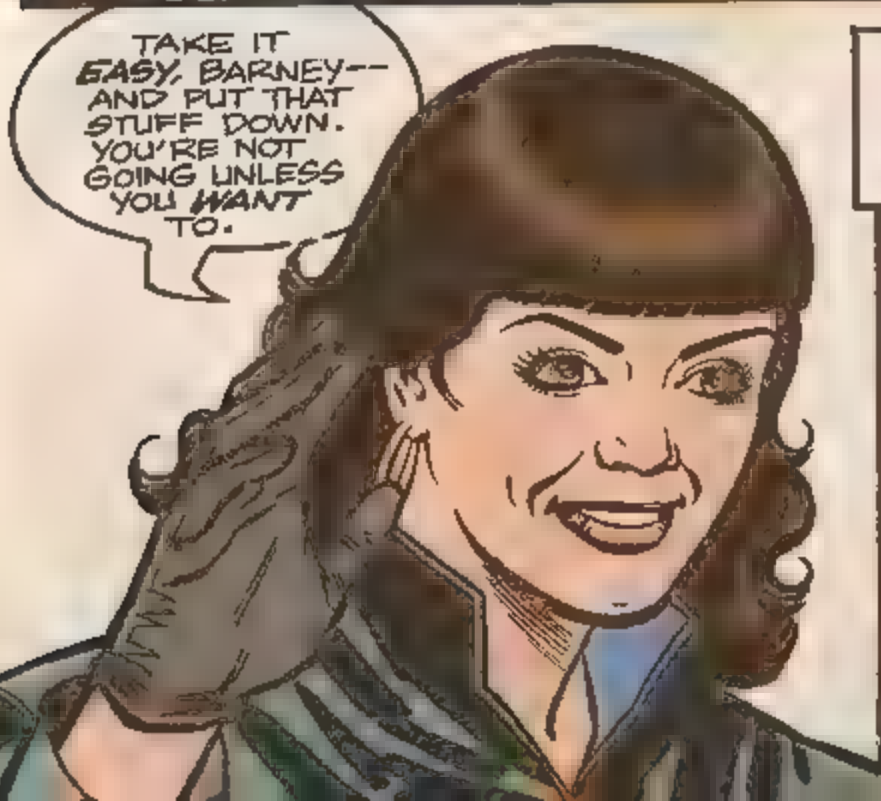


THIS IS
YOUR OFFICE
NOW, BUT I'D LIKE
A FEW MINUTES TO
CLEAN OUT MY DESK.
IS THAT ASKING
TOO MUCH?



HELLO,
BARNEY.
IT'S BEEN
A LONG
TIME.

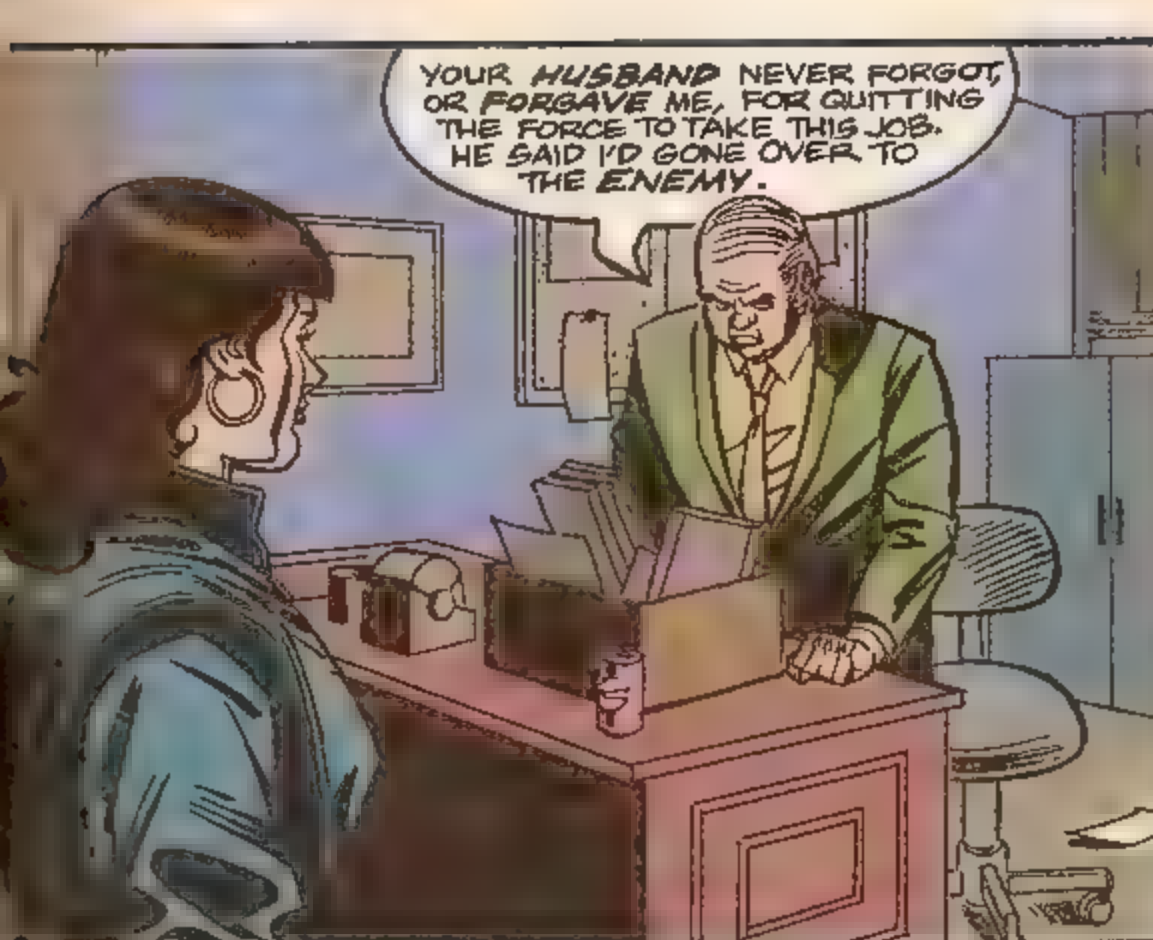
I KNOW HOW YOU FEEL
ABOUT ME. I'M OUTA HERE...
LET'S NOT MAKE A DAMN
SCENE OUT OF
IT...



TAKE IT
EASY, BARNEY--
AND PUT THAT
STUFF DOWN.
YOU'RE NOT
GOING UNLESS
YOU WANT
TO.

"YOU WERE A GOOD COP,
BARNEY. YOU SAVED MY
HUSBAND'S LIFE -- A COUPLE
TIMES, I HAVEN'T FORGOTTEN
THAT."

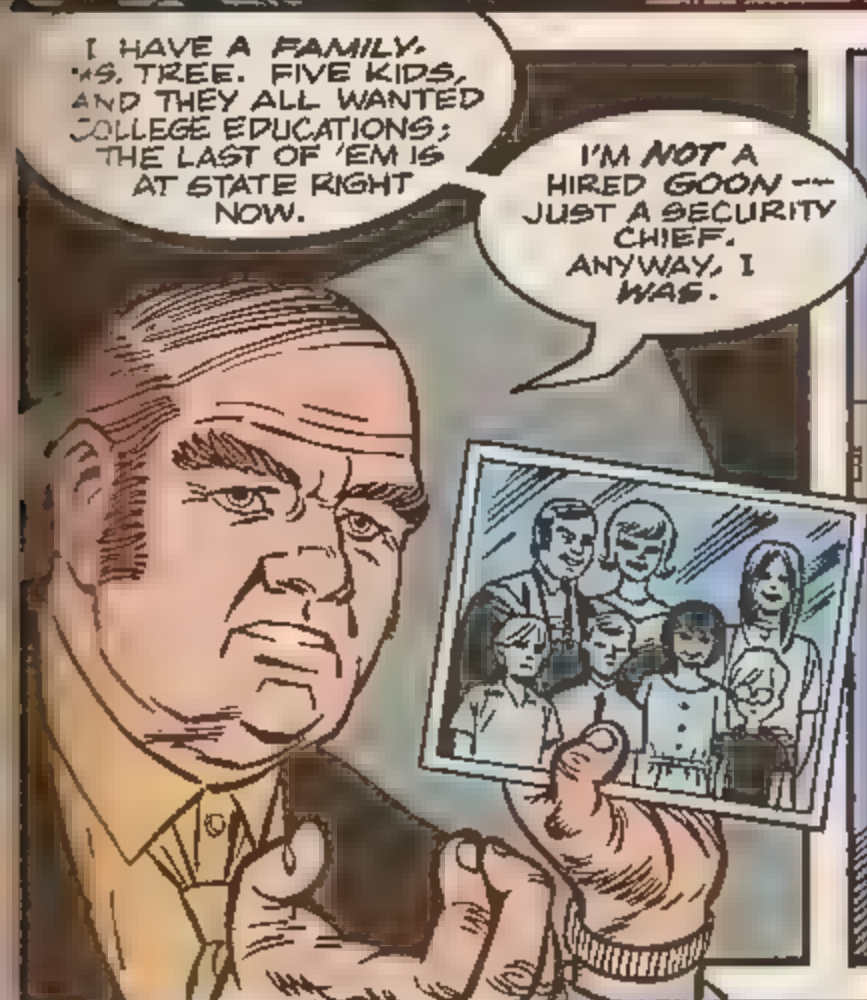




YOUR **HUSBAND** NEVER FORGOT, OR FORGAVE ME, FOR QUITTING THE FORCE TO TAKE THIS JOB. HE SAID I'D GONE OVER TO THE **ENEMY**.



HAD YOU ?



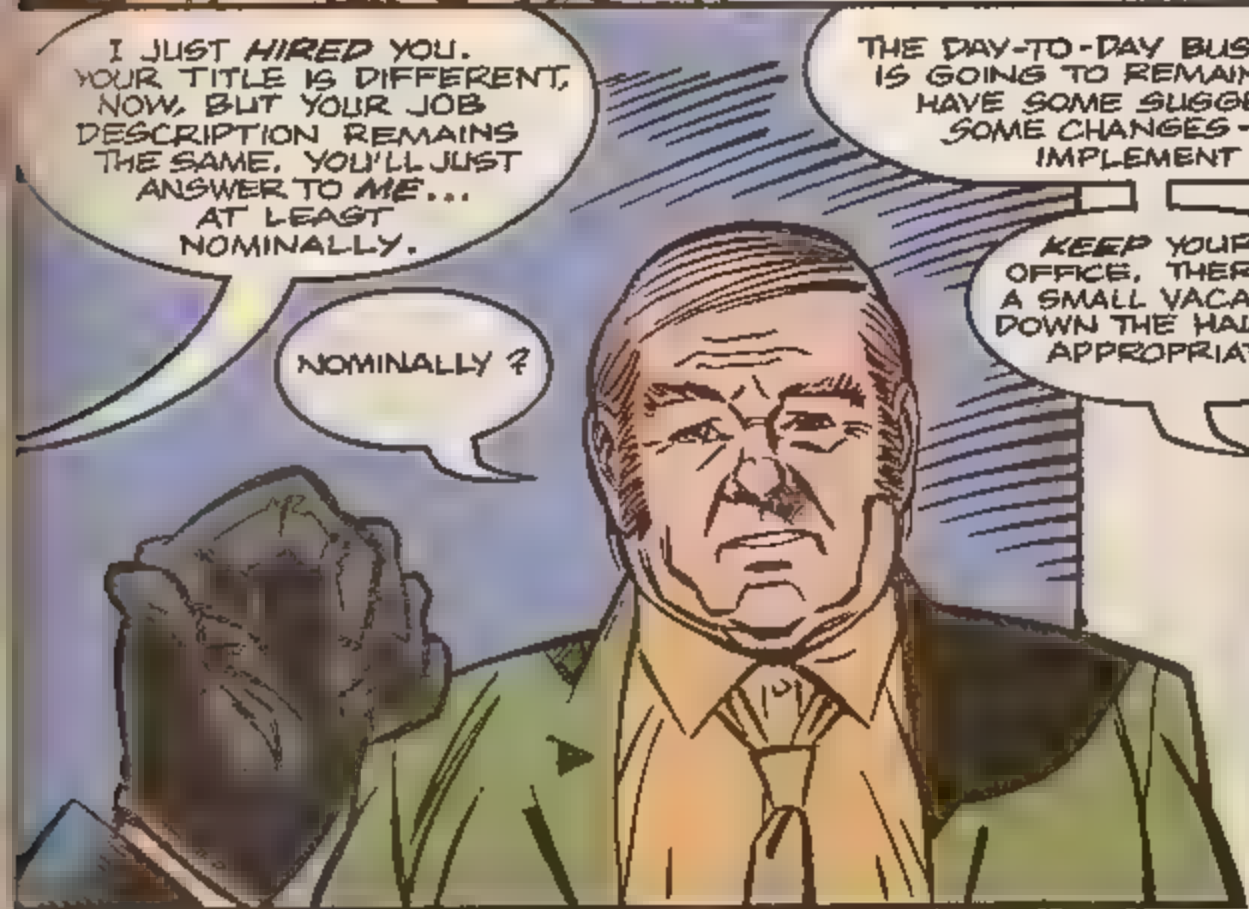
I HAVE A **FAMILY**. **MS. TREE**. FIVE KIDS, AND THEY ALL WANTED COLLEGE EDUCATIONS; THE LAST OF 'EM IS AT STATE RIGHT NOW.

I'M NOT A HIRED GOON -- JUST A SECURITY CHIEF. ANYWAY, I WAS.



WELL, YOU'RE NOT SECURITY CHIEF, BUT YOU'RE **ASSISTANT CHIEF** OF SECURITY, IF YOU WANT IT.

DONNIE JUST CANNED ME !



I JUST **HIRED** YOU. YOUR TITLE IS DIFFERENT, NOW, BUT YOUR JOB DESCRIPTION REMAINS THE SAME. YOU'LL JUST ANSWER TO ME... AT LEAST NOMINALLY.

NOMINALLY ?

THE DAY-TO-DAY BUSINESS OF SECURITY IS GOING TO REMAIN YOURS... I'LL HAVE SOME SUGGESTIONS, MAKE SOME CHANGES -- BUT YOU'LL IMPLEMENT THEM.

KEEP YOUR OFFICE, THERE'S A SMALL VACANCY DOWN THE HALL I'M APPROPRIATING.



IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG TO GET UP AND RUNNING. ALL I WANTED WAS A SECRETARY AND A COMPUTER AND THE HELP OF BARNEY PHILLIPS. I'D MADE IT CLEAR TO HIM THAT MY FIRST ORDER OF BUSINESS WAS FINDING HIS LATE BOSS'S KILLER.

HERE THEY ARE, MS. TREE. EVERY FORMER EMPLOYEE WHO WORKED IN CORPORATE HQ AND WAS DISMISSED -- OR QUIT UNDER PRESSURE WITHIN THE PAST TWO YEARS.

THANK YOU. YOU KNOW, I'VE STUDIED YOUR SECURITY SET-UP, BARNEY.

I HEAR YOU THINK IT "SUCKS."

HYPERBOLE. ACTUALLY, IT'S NOT BAD... I GOT IN WITH A GUN ON ME, BUT SHORT OF AIRPORT-STYLE METAL DETECTORS AND A STATE-OF-SIEGE ATMOSPHERE, THERE'S NO PREVENTING THAT.

SECURITY PROCEDURES

MEI

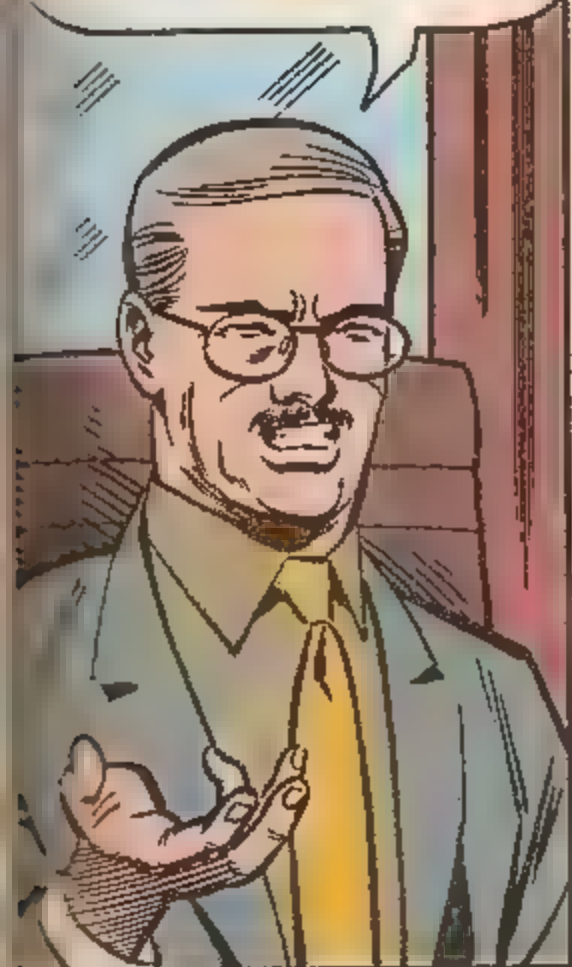
"FURTHERMORE, AFTER-HOURS SECURITY-CARDS ARE NEEDED TO TAKE ELEVATORS TO KEY FLOORS, AND TO UNLOCK CERTAIN DOORS -- BOTH OF WHICH WOULD HAVE BEEN NECESSARY TO GAIN ACCESS TO DOMINIQUE."

WE ALL KNOW IT'S AN INSIDE JOB. THE COPS DO, TOO -- WON'T TAKE YOUR FRIEND RAFE VALER LONG TO PICK UP ON THIS TRAIL, EITHER...

WELL, COOPERATE WITH HIM -- BUT SLOWLY. I'M GOING TO BE OUT IN THE FIELD QUESTIONING THESE DISGRUNTLED FORMER MUERTA EMPLOYEES...

TO SEE IF ANY OF 'EM
HAVE A KILL-SIZE
GRUDGE..."

I WALKED 'CAUSE I
DIDN'T LIKE THE
MENTALITY OF MUERTA
ENTERPRISES.
SPECIFICALLY DONNIE
MUERTA, WHO IS A
YUPPIE FROM HELL.
FAR AS I'M CONCERNED
-- A PONY-TAILED...



... SNEAK. DONNIE
HAS HIS OWN OFFICE
BUGGED. FOR CRYIN'
OUT LOUD! TAPE RECORDS
ALL TELEPHONE
CONVERSATIONS,
ALL OFFICE MEETINGS,
FORMAL AND INFORMAL.
A REGULAR NEW-AGE
NIXON! WHEN I
HEARD ABOUT THIS...



... I QUIT IMMEDIATELY.
MY PRIVACY MEANS
SOMETHING TO ME. MY
INTEGRITY MEANS SOME-
THING TO ME, TOO. AND
THERE WAS SEXUAL
PRESSURE, TOO, AND SINCE I
SUSPECT DONNIE MAY BE...



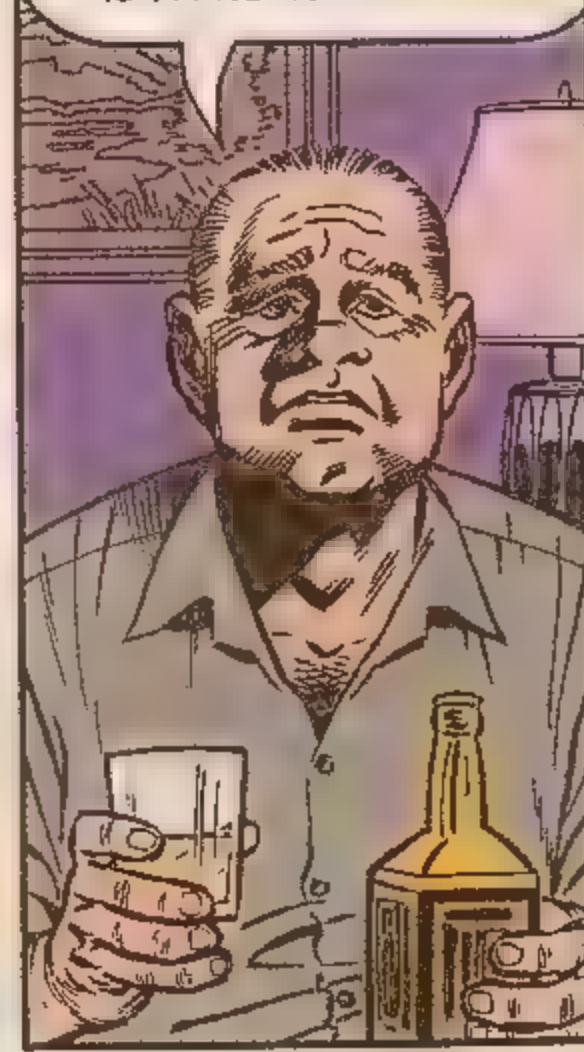
... BISEXUAL. AND IN
THESE DAYS OF AIDS,
I CAN'T BE TOO CAREFUL.
OH, I COULD HAVE FILED
AGAINST HIM, BUT
BEHIND ALL THAT GLASS
AND STEEL, MUERTA
ENTERPRISES IS STILL...



... THE MOB. FINALLY,
THE GUILT GOT TO ME,
FRANKLY. NOTHING I
DID PERSONALLY HAD
ANY CONNECTION WITH
ANYTHING REMOTELY
ILLEGAL. BUT I STILL
HAD A SENSE OF DOING
SOMETHING WRONG,
SOMETHING...



... EVIL. ALL THIS
TALK OF MOVING INTO
STRICTLY LEGITIMATE
CONCERNS IS BULLSHIT.
DOMINIQUE MAY HAVE
BEEN SINCERE, BUT
"DON DONNIE"... THAT'S
WHAT THE MOB CONTINGENT
CALLS HIM, YOU KNOW...
I THINK HE'D SELL CRACK
TO A FIVE-YEAR-OLD.



THEY'D ALL BEEN FRANK WITH ME, THE FORMER MUERTA EMPLOYEES, BUT THEN I HADN'T MENTIONED I WAS WORKING FOR THE MUERTAS. THEY ALL KNEW WHO I WAS, AND FIGURED I WAS TRYING TO CLEAR MYSELF.

BUT I HADN'T TURNED UP ANY GOOD SUSPECTS. NOBODY SEEMED TO HAVE A LARGE ENOUGH HATE-ON TO SEND DOMINIQUE MUERTA TO HER LINTIMELY IF JUST REWARD.

A GENTLEMAN FROM THE POLICE IS HERE...

DO I HAVE TO GET A COURT ORDER TO GET THE NAMES I'M AFTER? YOUR KEPT COP, PHILLIPS, IS STONEWALLING ME...

THE DISGRUNTLED FORMER EMPLOYEES LIST? IT'S RIGHT HERE.

OH. THANKS, MICHAEL...

WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU UP TO? WORKING FOR THE MUERTAS? THIS IS NUTS...

I'M UPWARDLY MOBILE, RAFE. DON'T YOU WATCH "THIRTYSOMETHING"?

MORE LIKE THIRTY-CALIBER-SOMETHING IN YOUR CASE, I DON'T LIKE THIS.

I DON'T EXPECT YOU TO, WHAT CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT DON DONNIE?



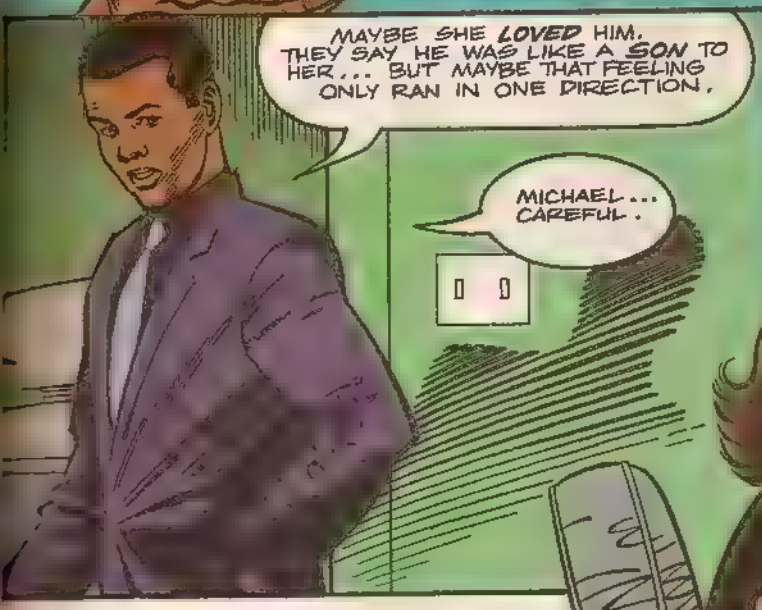
HE'S YOUR BOSS!

DO YOU BELIEVE HE SHARES HIS LATE AUNT'S DESIRE TO PHASE OUT ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES?



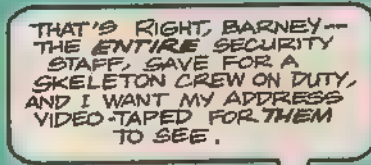
HELL, NO. I THINK HE'S A SHARK. WHY?

HIS AUNT FELT HE WAS AN ALLY.

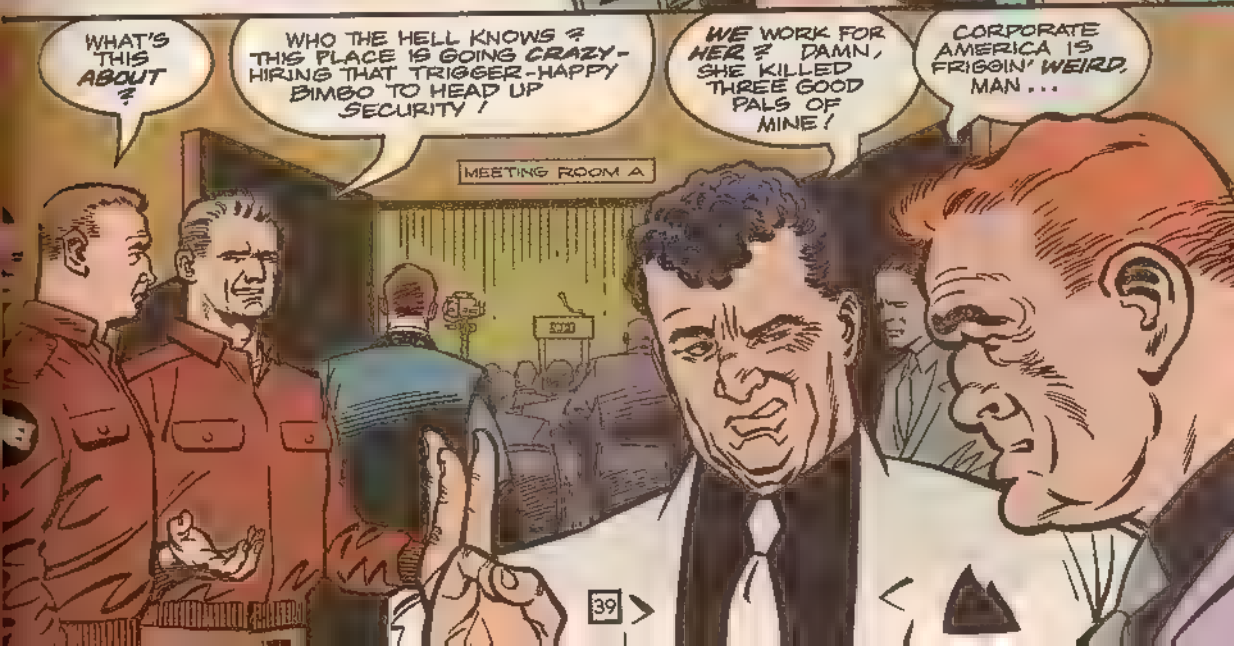


MAYBE SHE LOVED HIM. THEY SAY HE WAS LIKE A SON TO HER... BUT MAYBE THAT FEELING ONLY RAN IN ONE DIRECTION.

MICHAEL... CAREFUL.



THAT'S RIGHT, BARNEY-- THE ENTIRE SECURITY STAFF, GAVE FOR A SKELETON CREW ON DUTY, AND I WANT MY ADDRESS VIDEO-TAPED FOR THEM TO SEE.



WHAT'S THIS ABOUT?

WHO THE HELL KNOWS? THIS PLACE IS GOING CRAZY--HIRING THAT TRIGGER-HAPPY BIMBO TO HEAD UP SECURITY!

WE WORK FOR HER? DAMN, SHE KILLED THREE GOOD PALS OF MINE!

CORPORATE AMERICA IS FRIGGIN' WEIRD, MAN...

MEETING ROOM A

I THINK YOU ALL KNOW WHO I AM. AND I'M SURE YOU KNOW THAT, FOR THE PAST SEVERAL DAYS, I'VE BEEN YOUR NEW CHIEF OF SECURITY. YOU'RE WONDERING, I'M SURE, WHAT CHANGES WILL BE GOING DOWN...

BUT I'M STILL STUDYING THE SECURITY SITUATION HERE, AND AM NOT READY TO INSTITUTE ANY MAJOR ALTERATIONS IN THE STATUS QUO... AND YOU WILL CONTINUE TO REPORT TO, AND DEAL WITH, MR. PHILLIPS AS IN THE PAST.

I DO WANT TO ANNOUNCE THAT EVERYONE IN THIS BUILDING -- BEGINNING WITH THE PEOPLE IN THIS ROOM -- WILL BE TAKING **POLYGRAPH TESTS** REGARDING THE MURDER OF DOMINIQUE MUERTA.

ARE THESE TESTS **VOLUNTARY**? WE GOT CERTAIN RIGHTS, YOU KNOW!

YEAH!

"WHY OF COURSE THESE TESTS ARE VOLUNTARY."

YOU SEE, I'M PARTICULARLY INTERESTED IN FINDING OUT WHO **DOESN'T** WANT TO TAKE A LIE-DETECTOR TEST.

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG FOR MY "PEP" TALK TO GET RESULTS...

YOU WANTED TO FLUSH OUT THE GUILTY PARTIES WITH YOUR LIE-DETECTOR THREAT---

IT'S NO THREAT, BARNEY.

WELL, YOU MAY NOT HAVE TO BOTHER GOING THROUGH WITH IT. I'VE BEEN APPROACHED BY AN M.E.I. EMPLOYEE WHO WANTS TO MEET WITH YOU, ONE-ON-ONE.

FOR THE PURPOSE OF... CONFESSING?

OR POINTING A FINGER. EITHER WAY, YOUR TACTIC WORKED...

YOU'VE BROUGHT A SUSPECT... OR AT LEAST AN INFORMER... OUT INTO THE OPEN.

WELL," BARNEY SAID, "RELATIVELY OUT INTO THE OPEN-- THE EMPLOYEE WANTS A MIDNIGHT MEET, JUST YOU AND HIM, IN THE UNDERGROUND PARKING GARAGE."

BARNEY! YOU KNOW I'M SUPPOSED TO BE HERE ALONE.

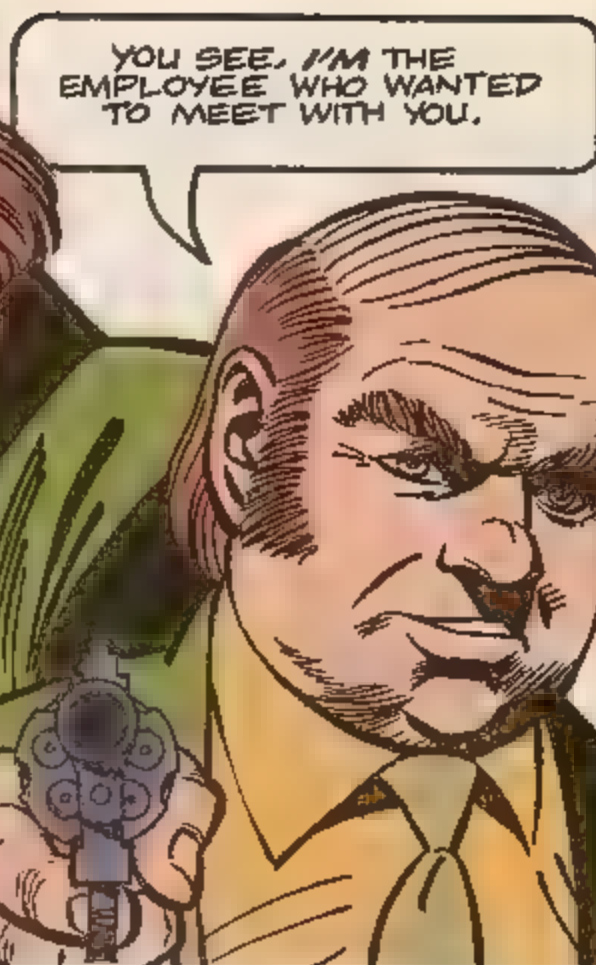
YES-- BUT I'M AFRAID OF A TRAP. I'D BETTER BACK YOU UP--

"DEEP THROAT" LIVES--

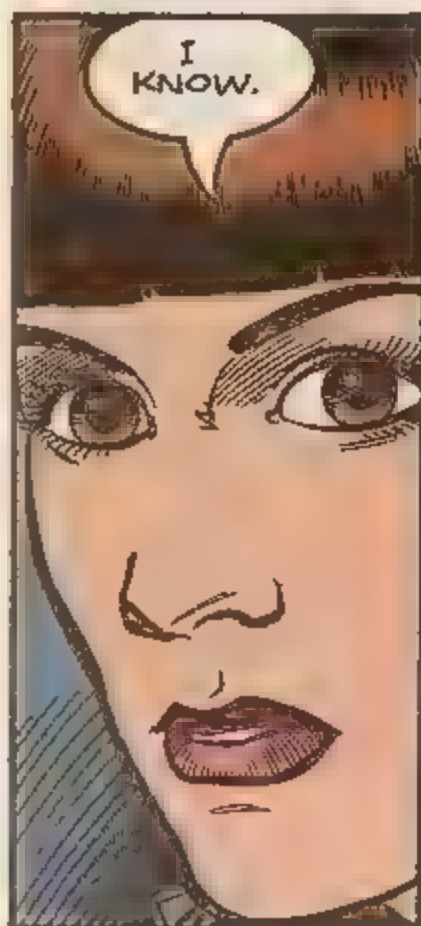


YOU THINK THAT GUN IS NECESSARY?

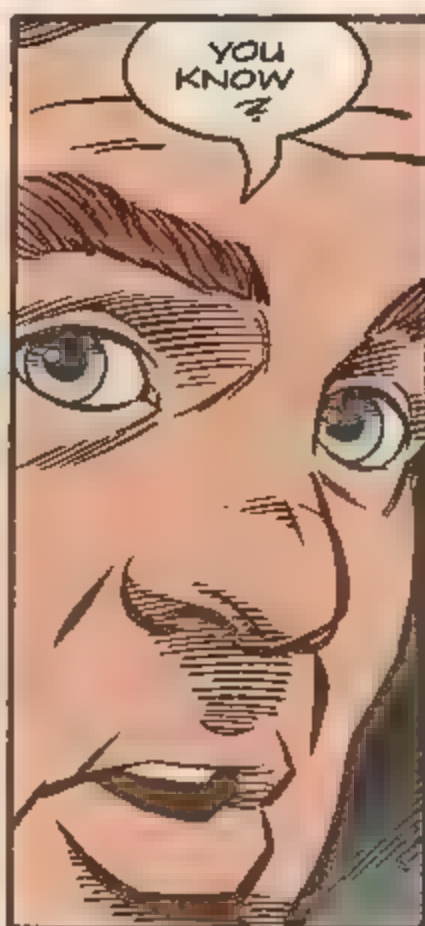
UNFORTUNATELY, YES.



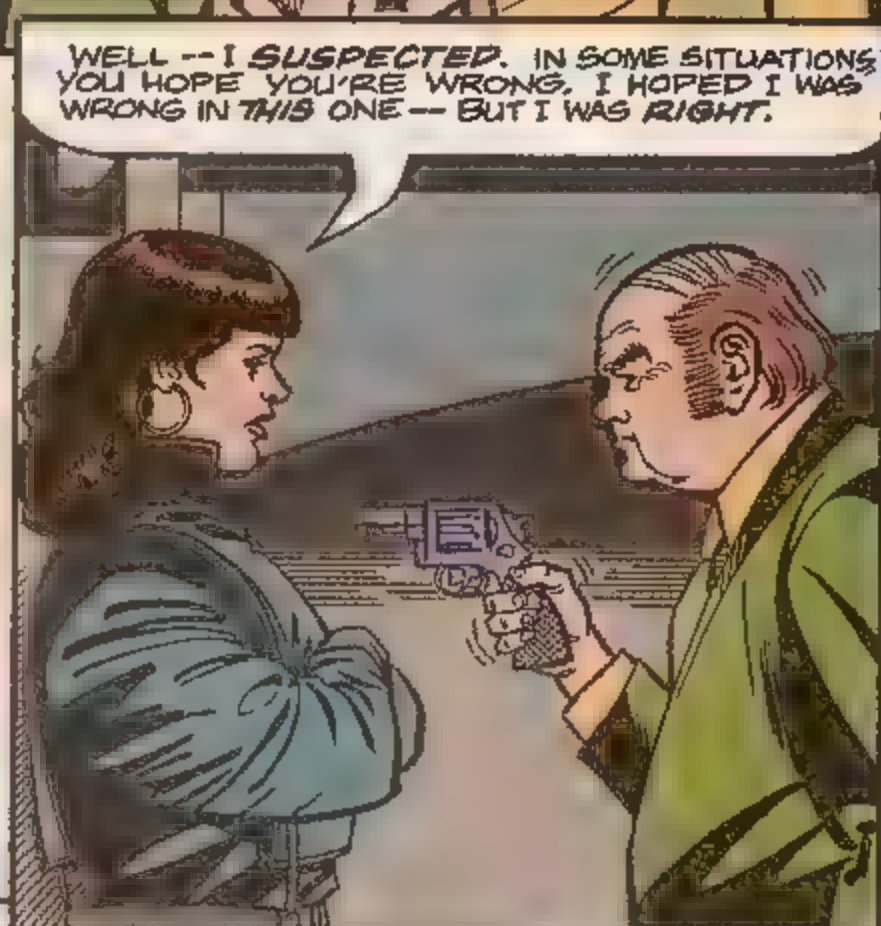
YOU SEE, I'M THE EMPLOYEE WHO WANTED TO MEET WITH YOU.



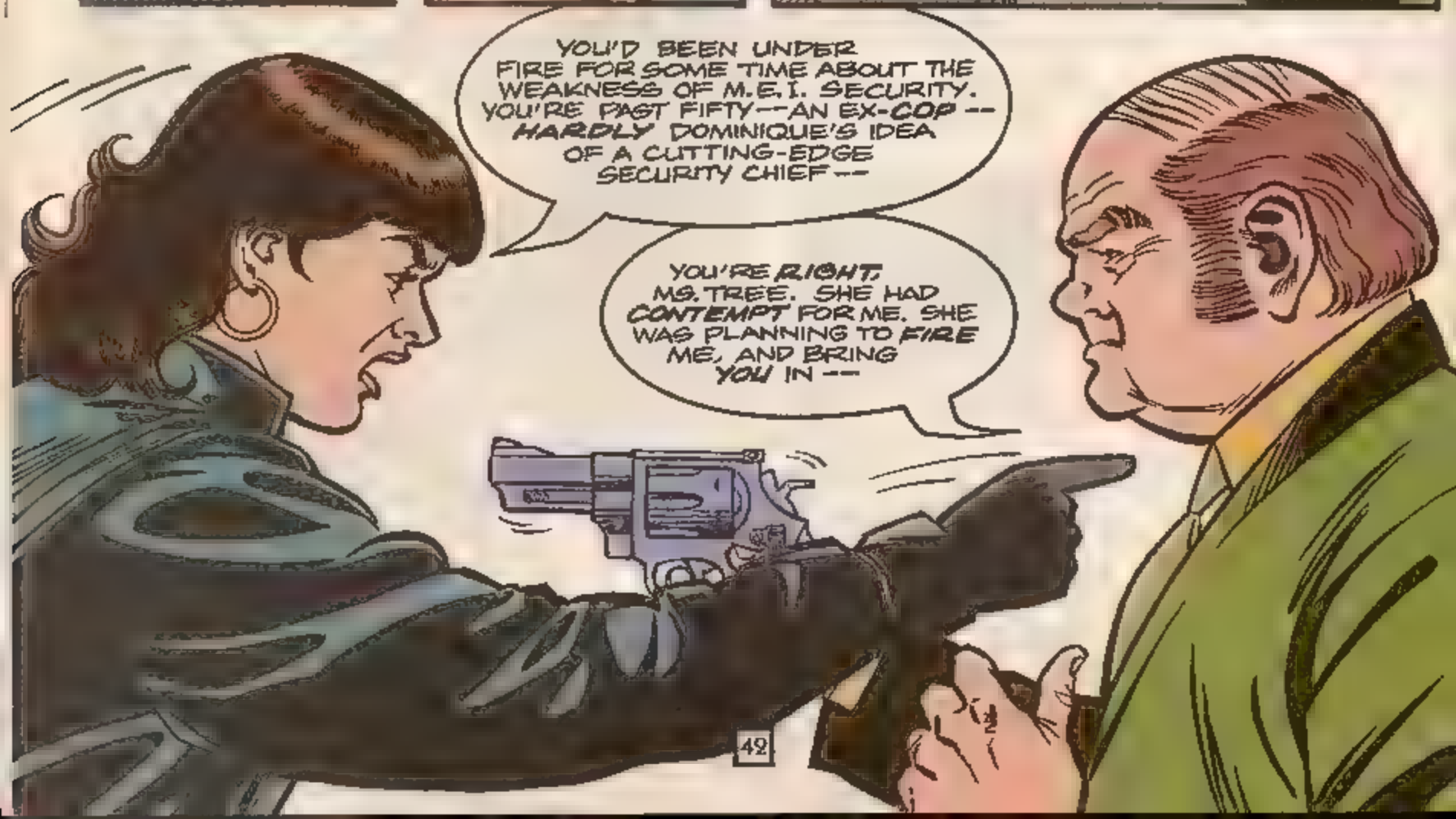
I KNOW.



YOU KNOW?




WELL -- I SUSPECTED. IN SOME SITUATIONS YOU HOPE YOU'RE WRONG. I HOPED I WAS WRONG IN THIS ONE -- BUT I WAS RIGHT.



YOU'D BEEN UNDER FIRE FOR SOME TIME ABOUT THE WEAKNESS OF M.E.I. SECURITY. YOU'RE PAST FIFTY--AN EX-COP-- HARDLY DOMINIQUE'S IDEA OF A CUTTING-EDGE SECURITY CHIEF--

YOU'RE RIGHT, MS. TREE. SHE HAD CONTEMPT FOR ME. SHE WAS PLANNING TO FIRE ME, AND BRING YOU IN --

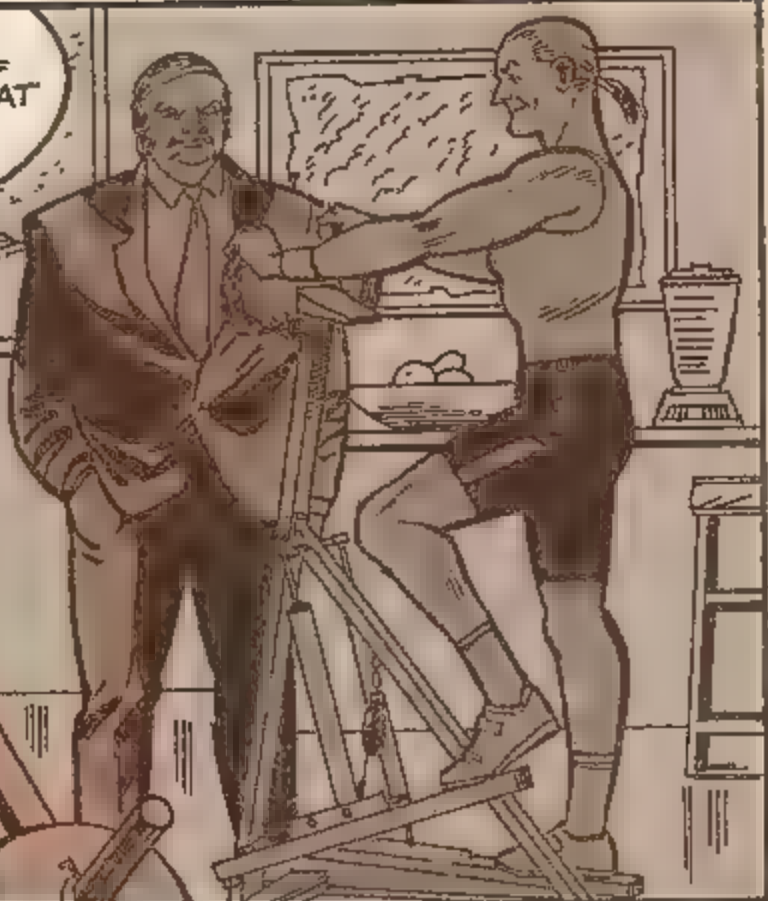


I STARTED SUCKING UP TO DON DONNIE. I KNEW, EVEN IF HIS AUNT WAS TOO BLIND TO, THAT HE WAS ANYTHING BUT IN FAVOR OF "PHASING" OUT CRIMINAL ENTERPRISES...

HE NEVER TOLD ME - HE NEVER ORDERED ME - BUT HE MADE IT CLEAR IN SO MANY WORDS...

THAT HE'D BE PLEASED IF HIS AUNT BECAME HIS LATE AUNT.

YES -- BUT YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND...



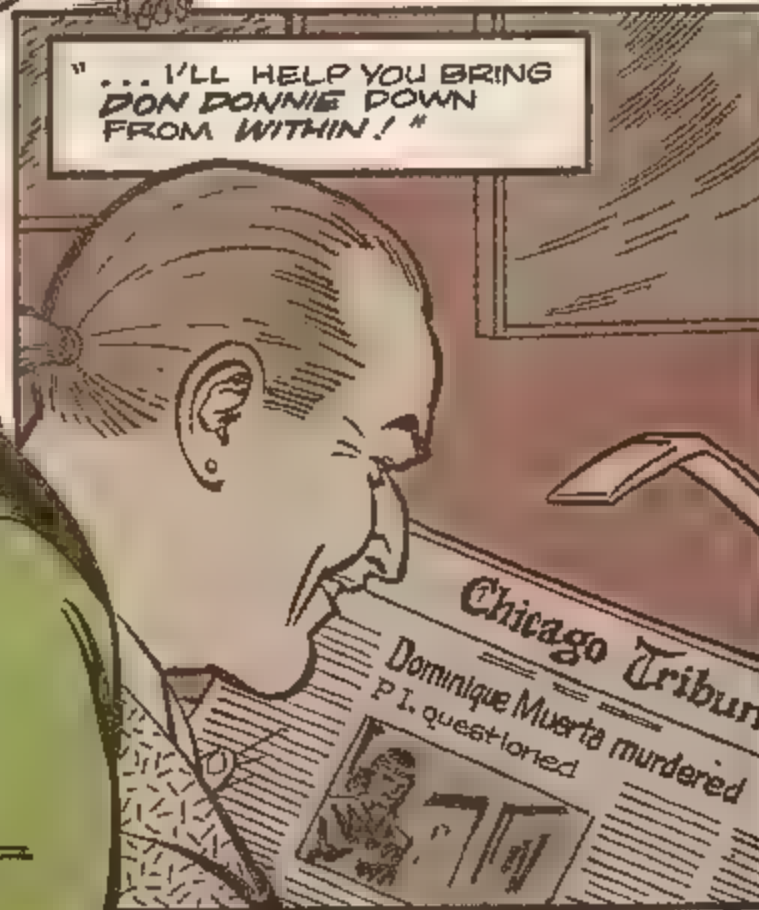
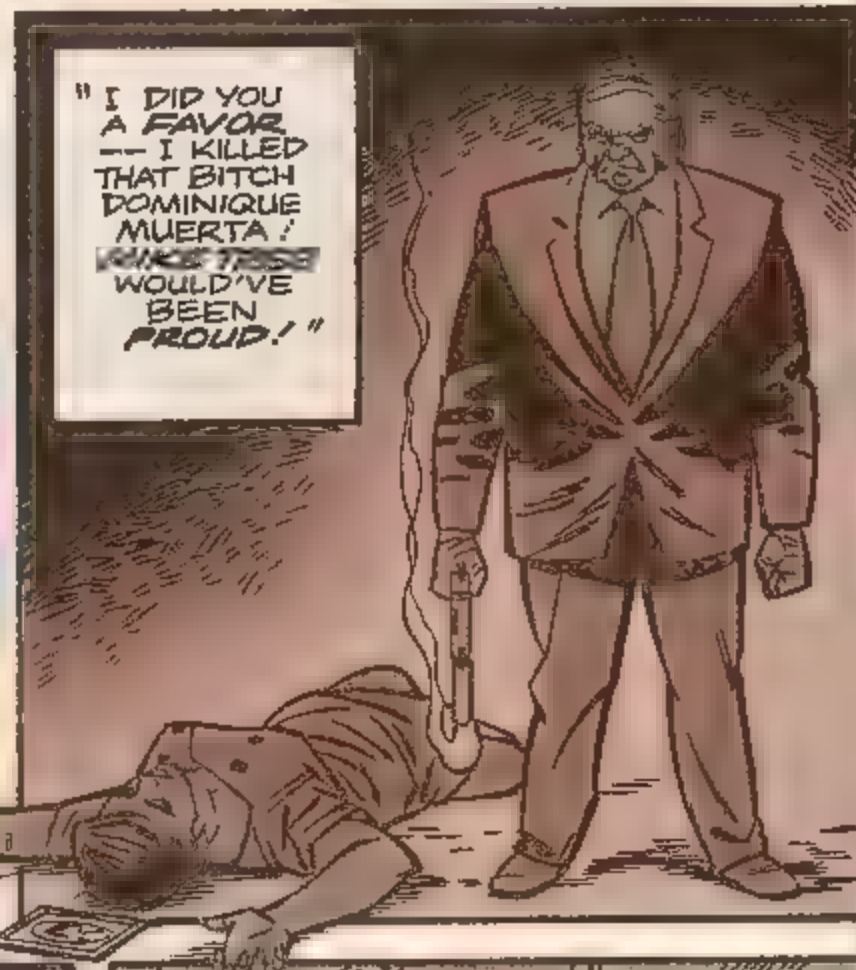
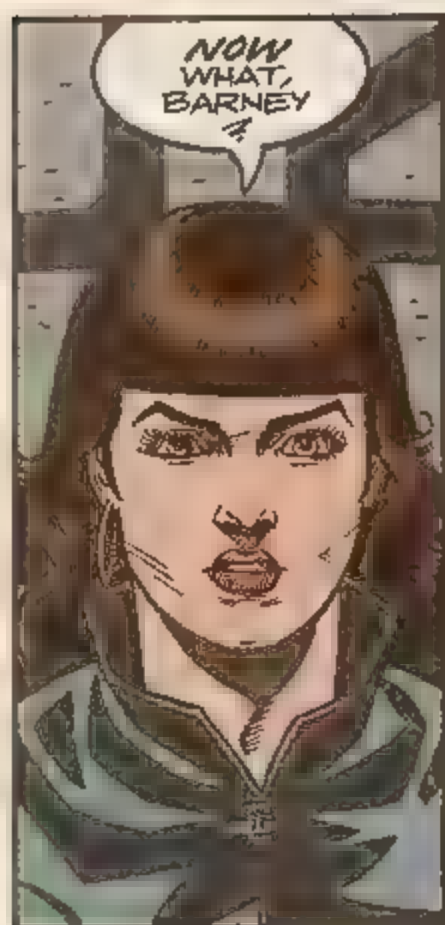
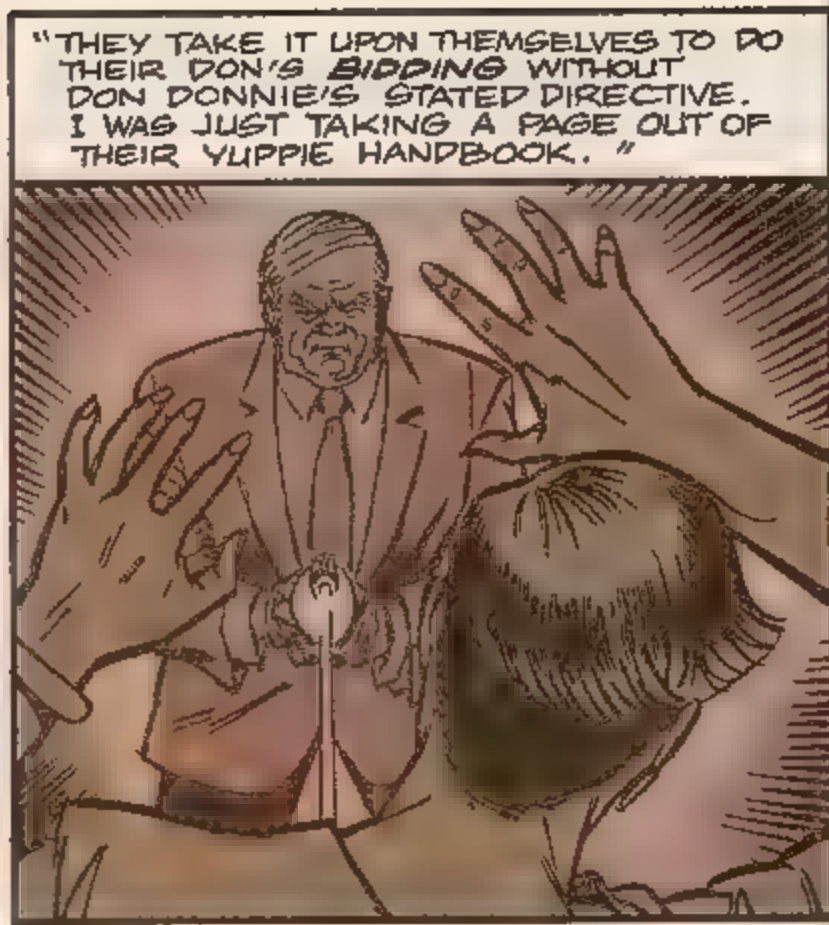
"DONNIE IS A MOBSTER WHO NEVER FIRED A GUN -- AND HE'S BETTER INSULATED THAN A COLORADO CONDO."

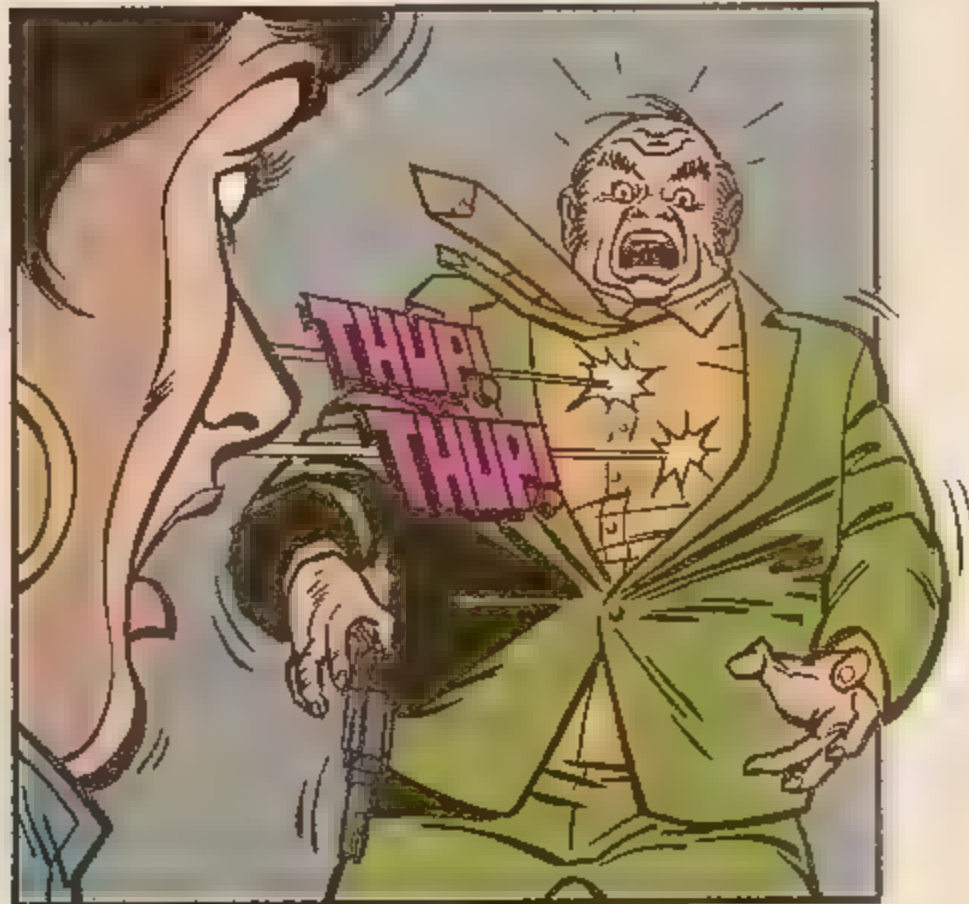
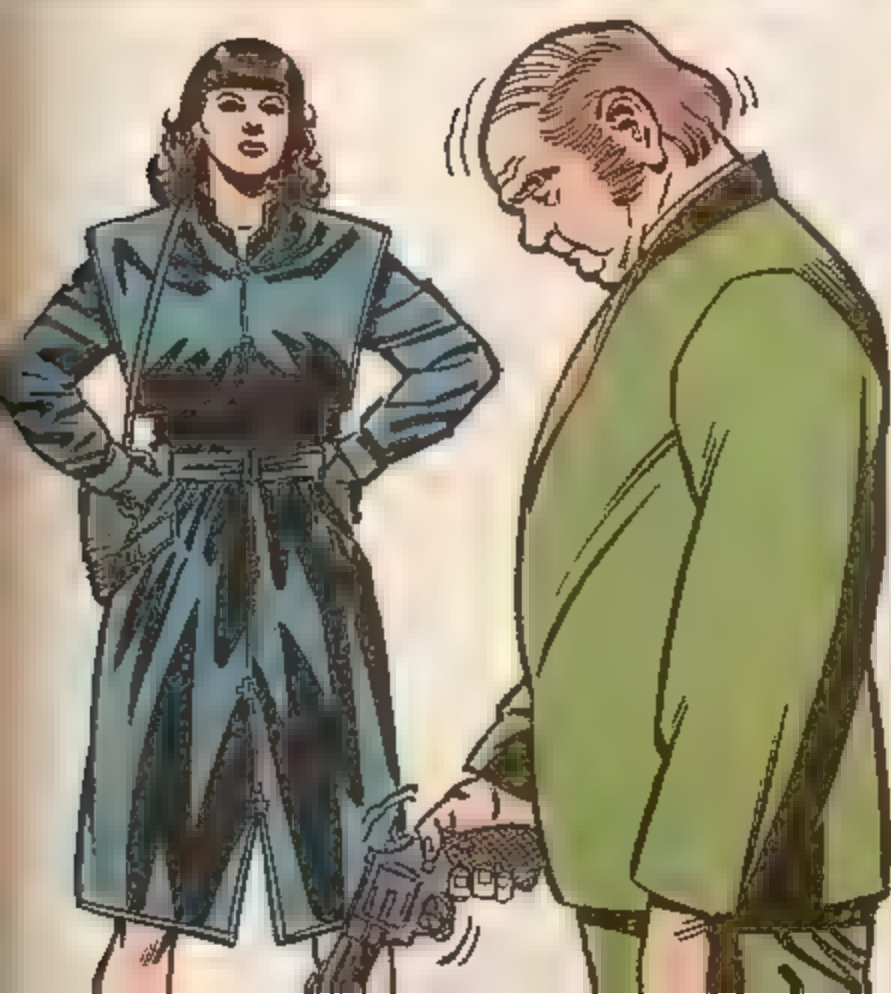
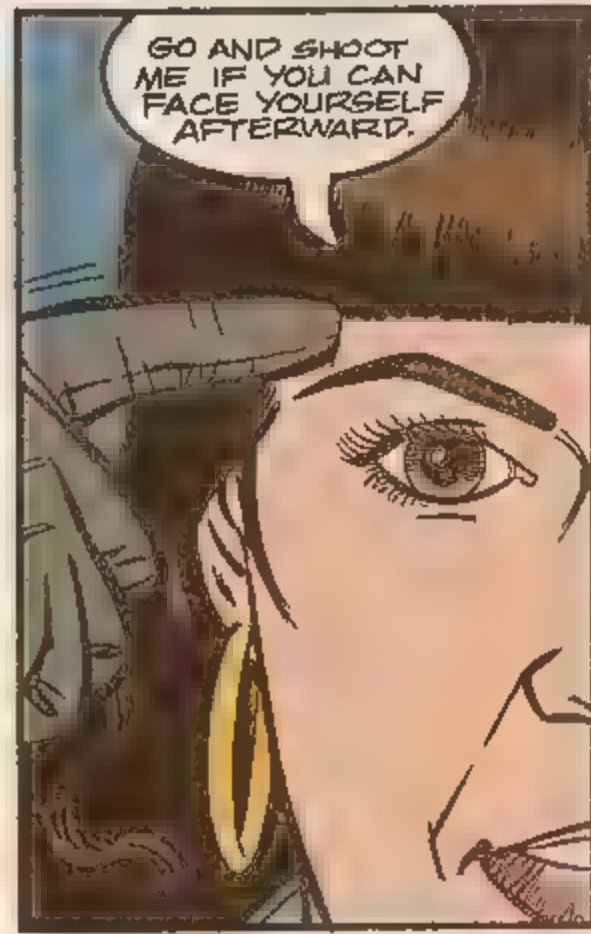
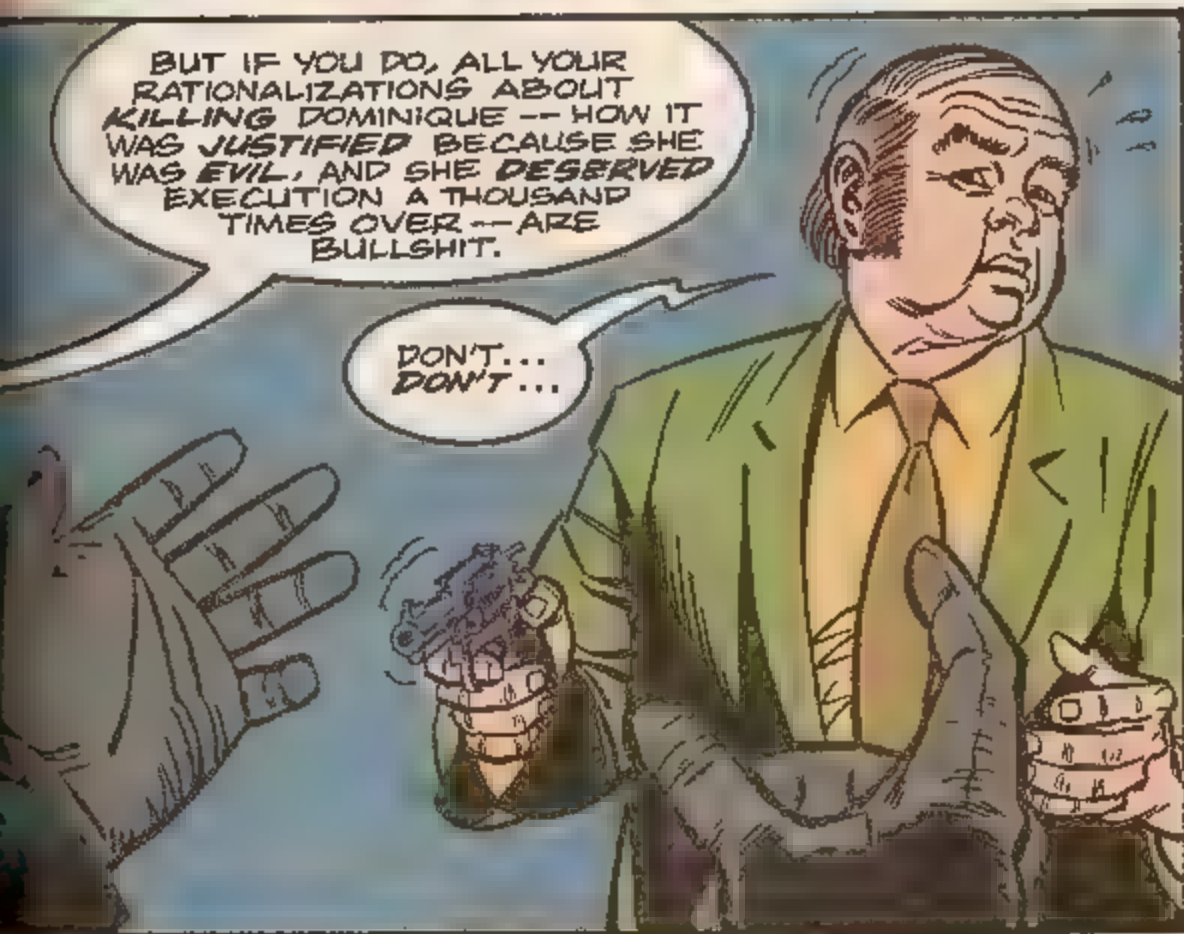
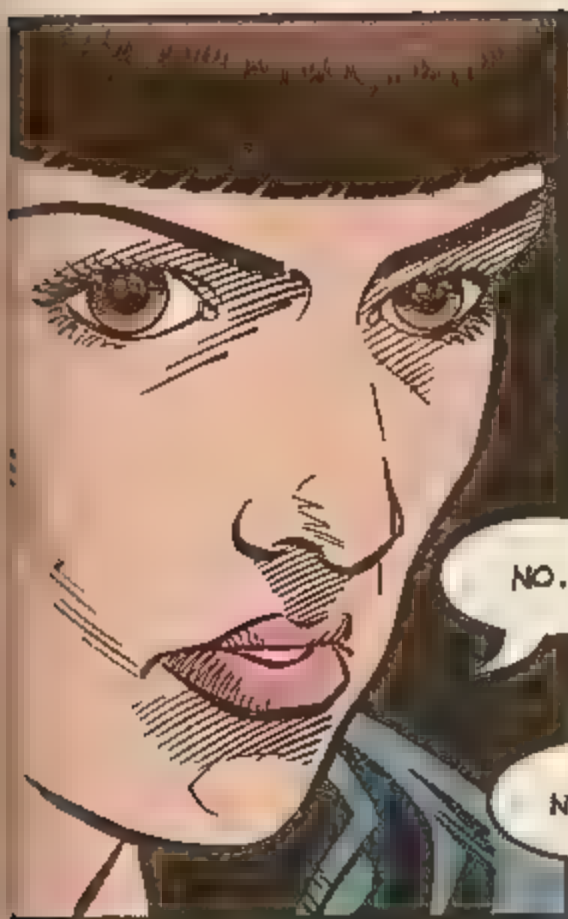


HIS MANAGEMENT STYLE IS TO LET THOSE BELOW HIM KNOW WHAT HE WANTS DONE... OBLIQUELY. WITHOUT EVER ISSUING A COMMAND FOR AN ILLEGAL ACT.

"AND HE TAPES EVERYTHING TO COVER HIS ASS," I SAID.







WHAT--
WHY...

DON
DONNIE'S
WISHES...

WERE YOU
FOLLOWING
ORDERS?

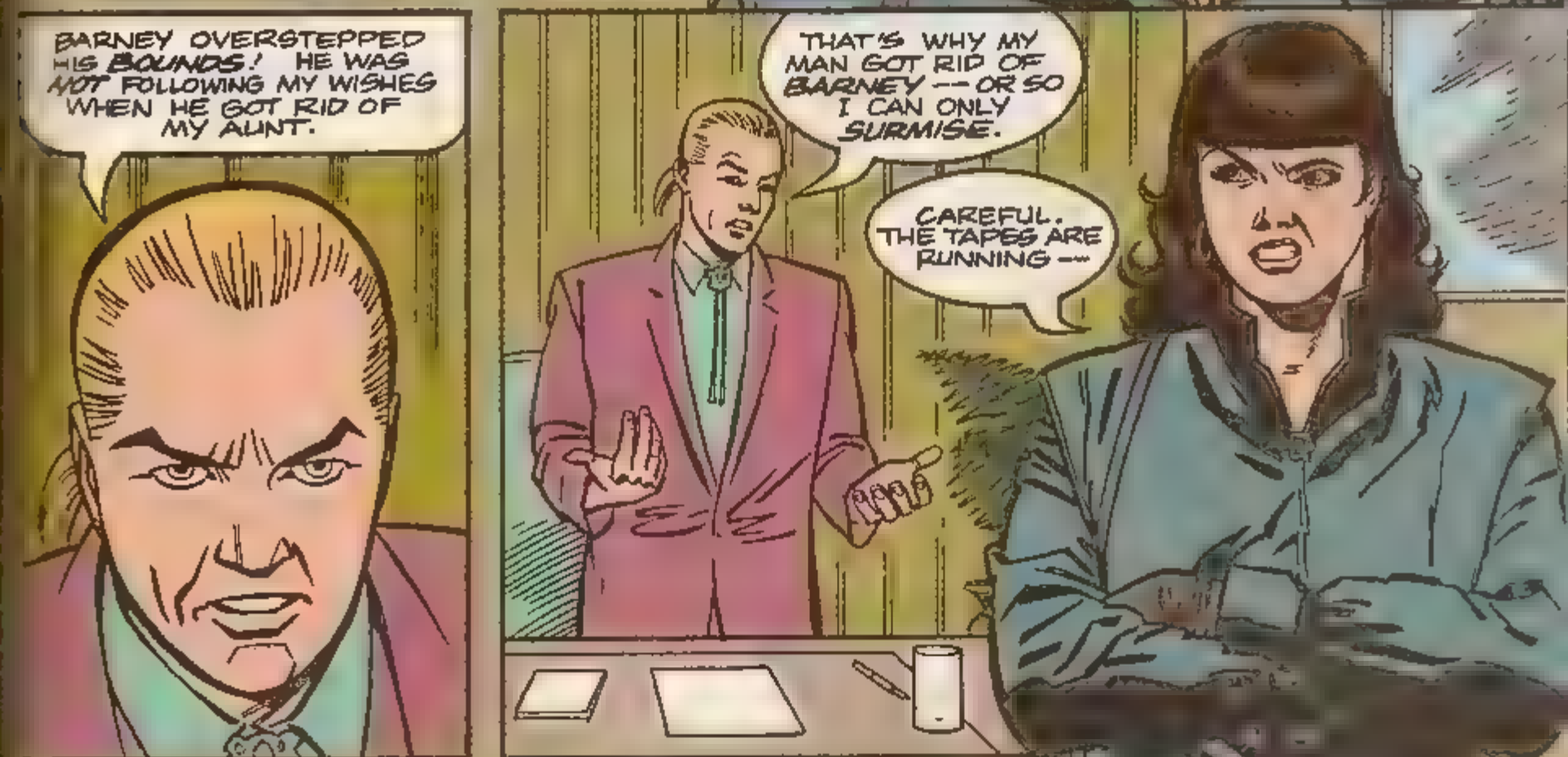
no...
just...
trying...
to...



PLEASE
YOU!

I NEVER
TOLD HIM TO
SHOOT BARNEY
PHILLIPS.

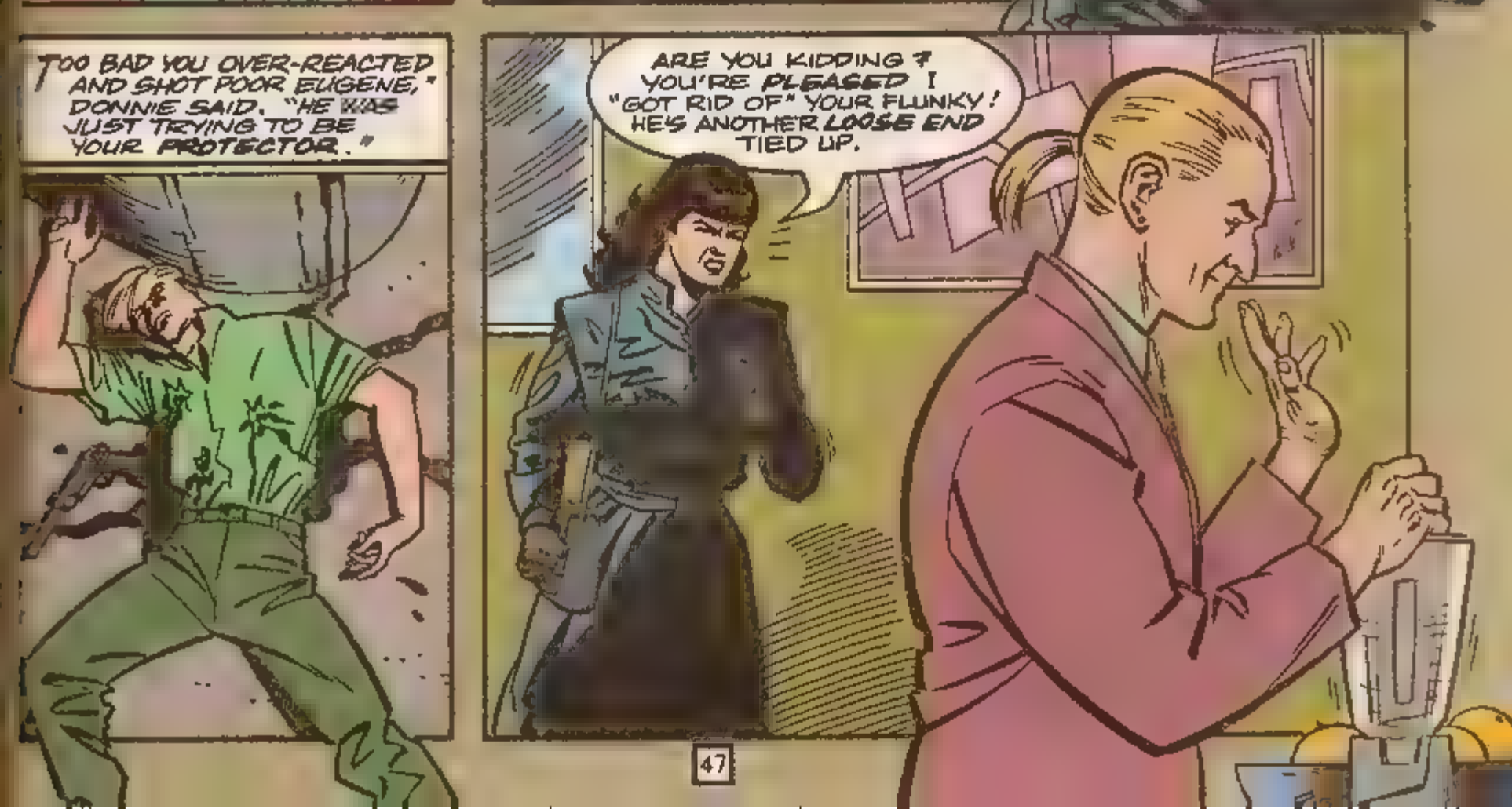
YOU JUST LET HIM KNOW, "IN
SO MANY WORDS." THE SAME
WAY YOU SENT BARNEY TOWARD
YOUR AUNT LIKE A GUIDED
MISSILE!



BARNEY OVERSTEPPED
HIS BOUNDS! HE WAS
NOT FOLLOWING MY WISHES
WHEN HE GOT RID OF
MY AUNT.

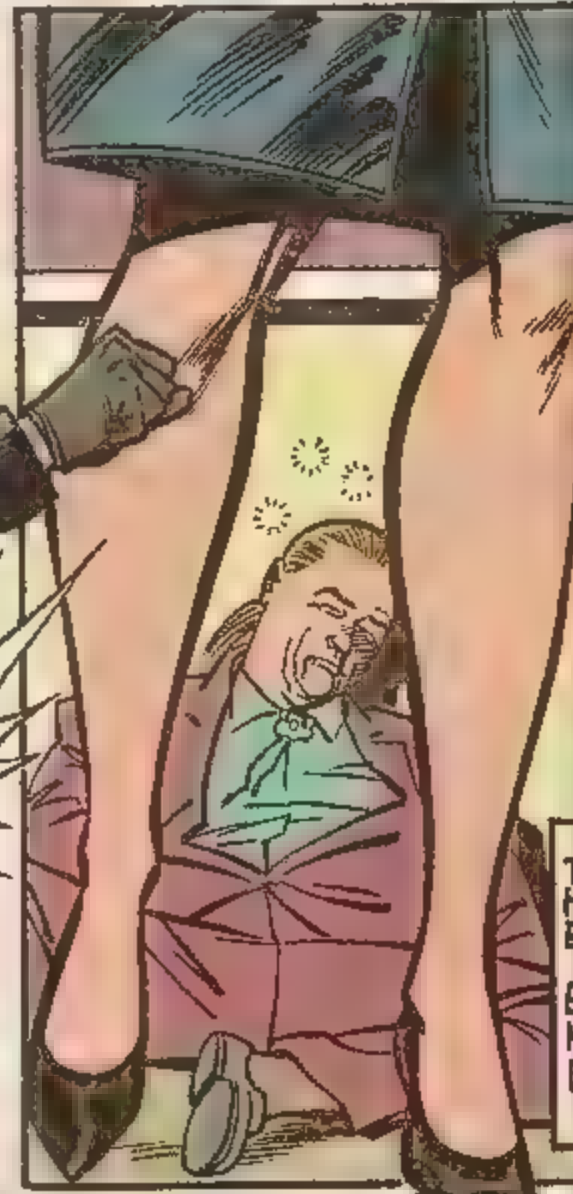
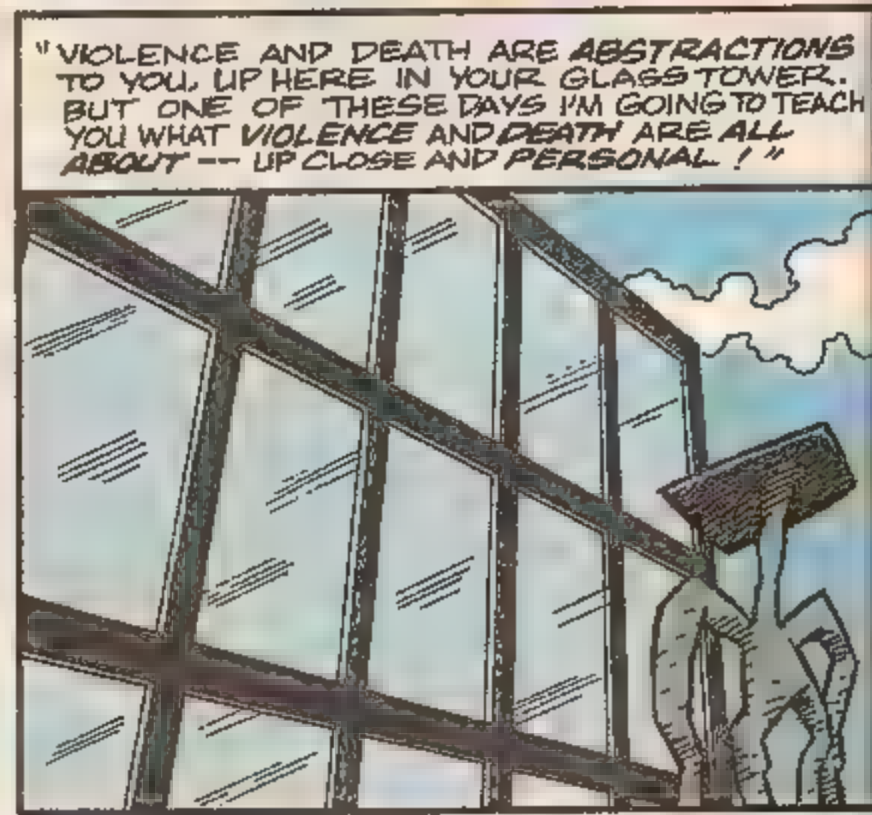
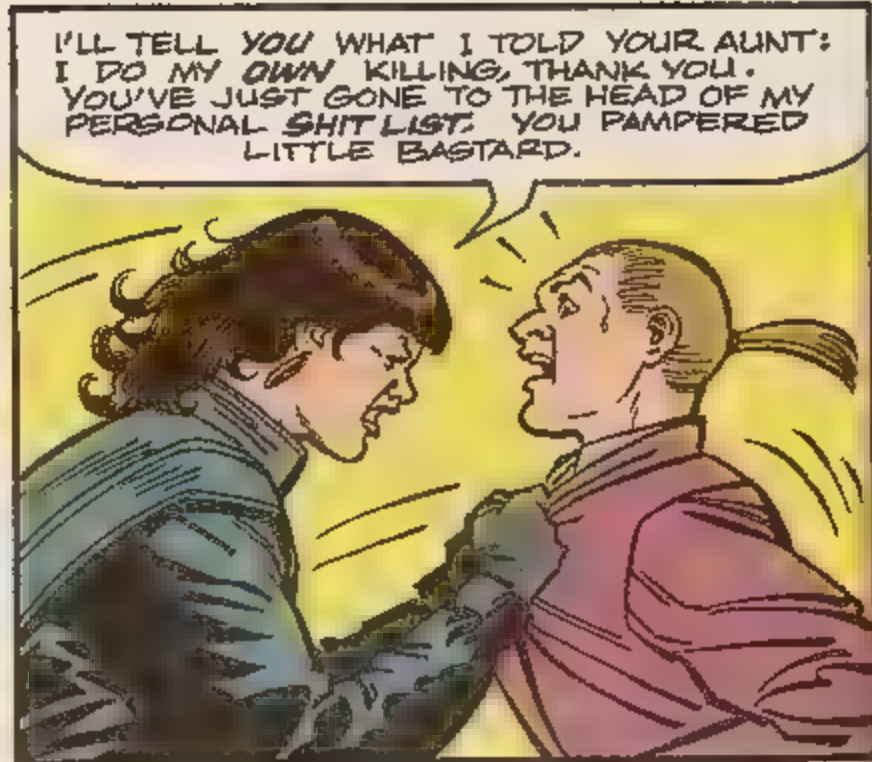
THAT'S WHY MY
MAN GOT RID OF
BARNEY -- OR SO
I CAN ONLY
SURMISE.

CAREFUL.
THE TAPES ARE
RUNNING --



TOO BAD YOU OVER-REACTED
AND SHOT POOR EUGENE,"
DONNIE SAID. "HE WAS
JUST TRYING TO BE
YOUR PROTECTOR."

ARE YOU KIDDING?
YOU'RE PLEASED I
"GOT RID OF" YOUR FLUNKY!
HE'S ANOTHER LOOSE END
TIED UP.





NIGHT

MIDNIGHT

WELCOME TO THE DEAD ZONE, THAT PART OF THE CITY NOBODY WANTS TO HEAR ABOUT. SLUM IS THE POLITE WORD. IN TWO MONTHS, SIX DERELICTS HAVE BEEN MURDERED, DRIVE-BY STYLE.

NOBODY KNOWS WHO, NOBODY KNOWS WHY.

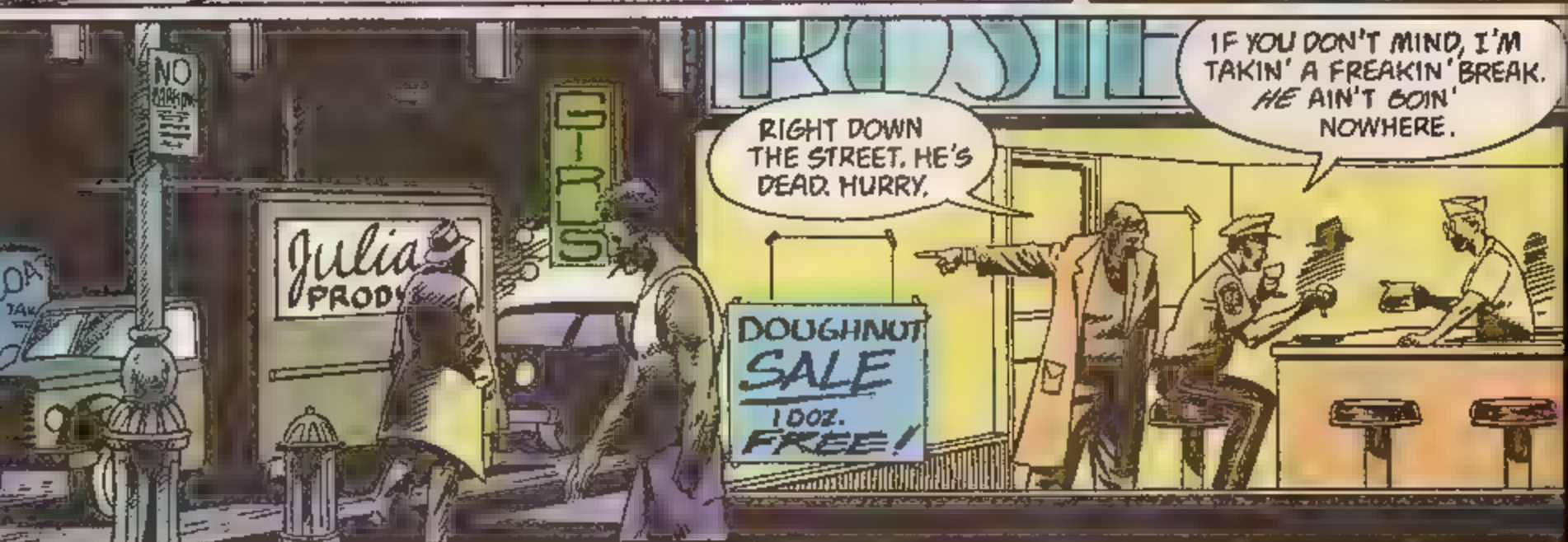
AND THE COPS DON'T GIVE MUCH OF A DAMN.

ED GORMAN
story
GRAHAM NOLAN
art
JOHN COSTANZA
letters
SAM PARSONS
colors
MIKE GOLD
editing

CLIFF KETTER DOESN'T HAVE MANY FRIENDS. WINOS DON'T MAKE MANY. SO SEEING HIS FRIEND MIKE SHOT TO DEATH MAKES HIM A LITTLE CRAZY

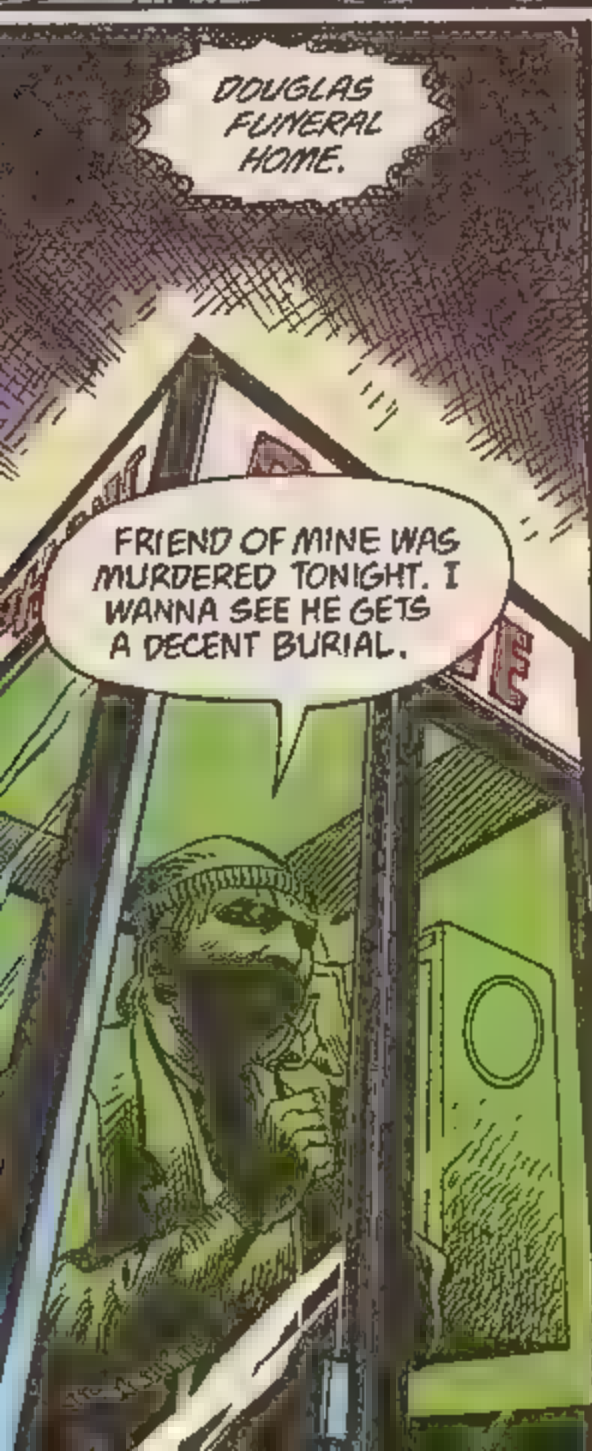


I'M GONNA FIND THE FREAKIN' GEEK WHO DID THIS TO YOU, MIKE. I PROMISE.



RIGHT DOWN THE STREET. HE'S DEAD. HURRY.

IF YOU DON'T MIND, I'M TAKIN' A FREAKIN' BREAK. HE AIN'T GOIN' NOWHERE.



DOUGLAS FUNERAL HOME.

FRIEND OF MINE WAS MURDERED TONIGHT. I WANNA SEE HE GETS A DECENT BURIAL.

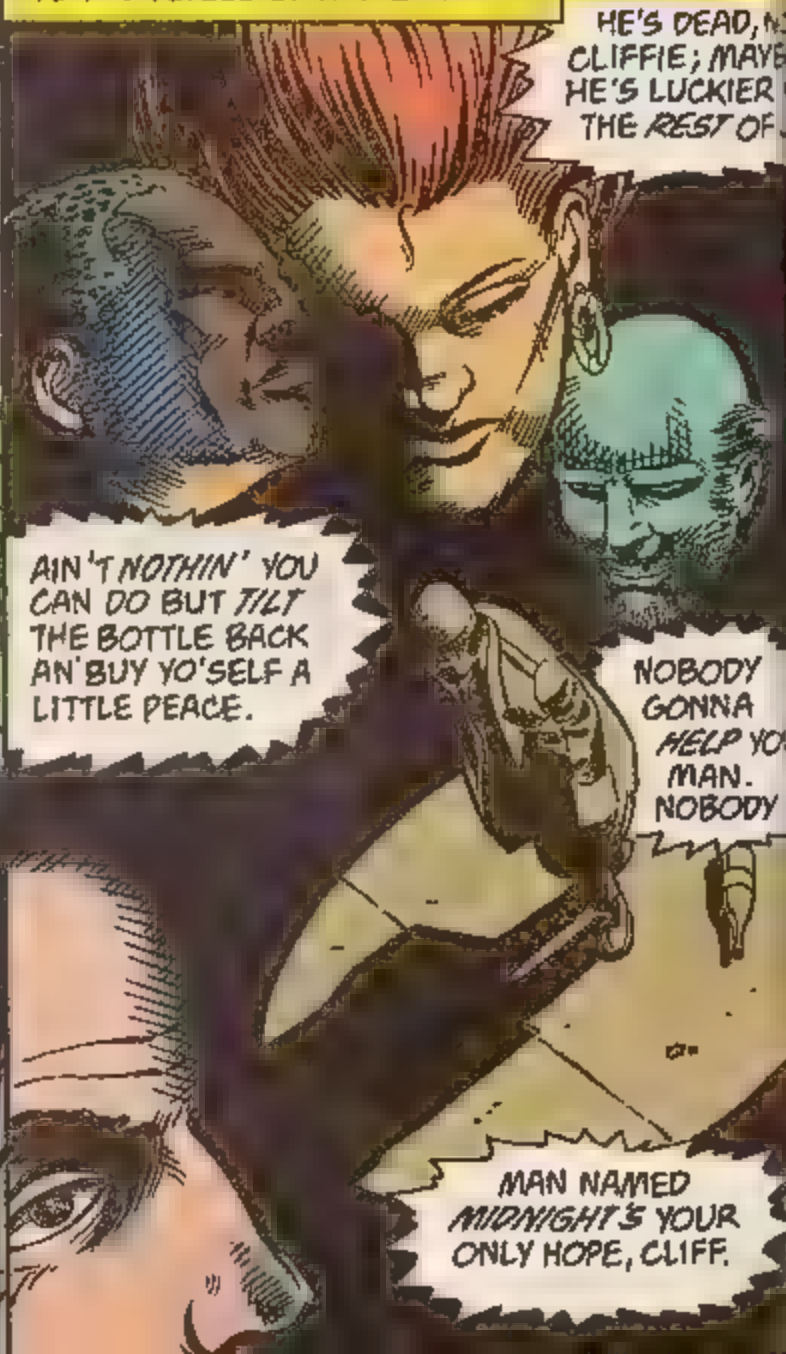
FOR PEOPLE WHO DON'T HAVE AN ACCOUNT WITH US, WE REQUIRE A SIZEABLE CASH DEPOSIT.

HE'S DEAD AND NOBODY GIVES A DAMN!



CLIFF WALKS THROUGH THE NIGHT, LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF THE GHETTO.

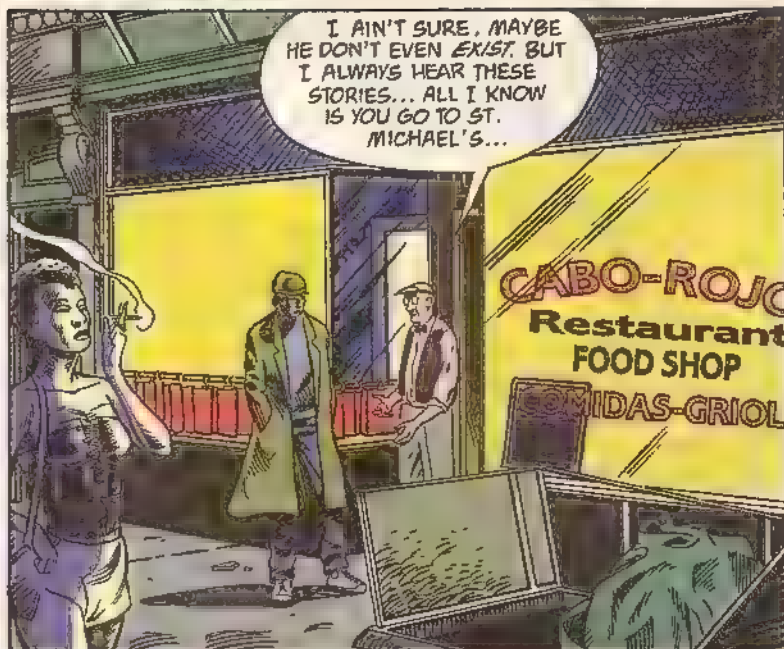
HE'S DEAD, CLIFFIE; MAYBE HE'S LUCKIER THAN THE REST OF



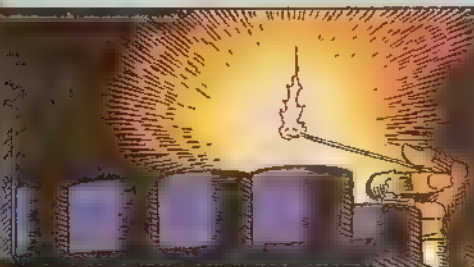
AIN'T NOthin' YOU CAN DO BUT TILT THE BOTTLE BACK AN' BUY YO'SELF A LITTLE PEACE.

NOBODY GONNA HELP YO MAN. NOBODY

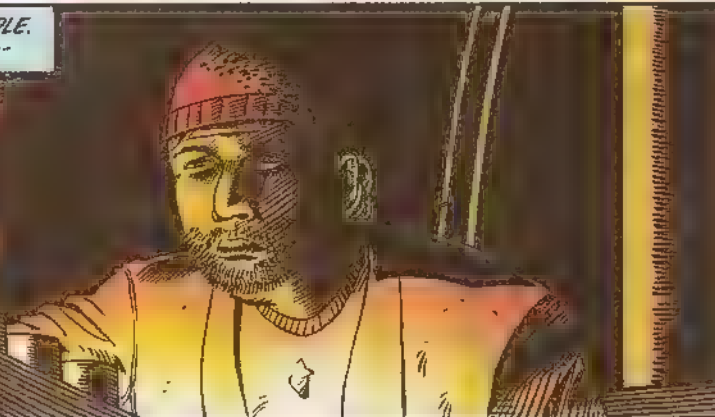
MAN NAMED MIDNIGHT'S YOUR ONLY HOPE, CLIFF.



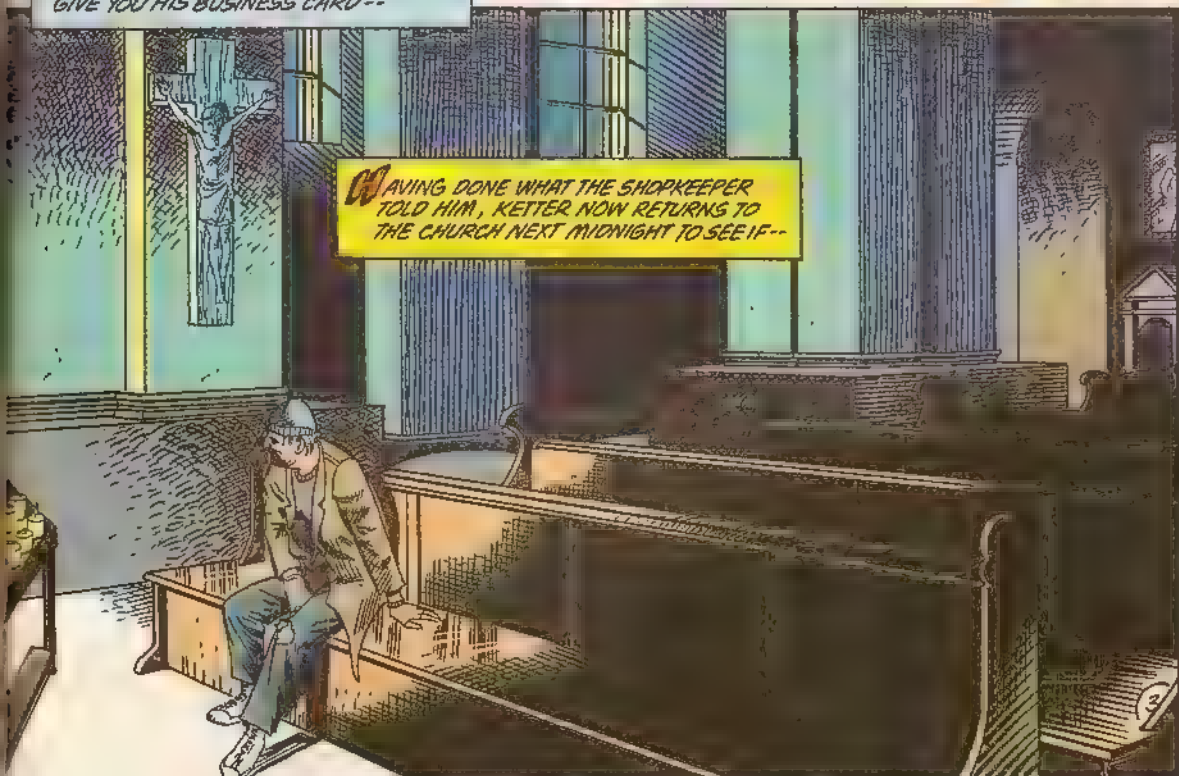
... AND YOU LIGHT THE ONLY YELLOW CANDLE. AND THEN-- ACCORDING TO WHAT I HEARD--



-- THE FOLLOWING MIDNIGHT, HE'LL APPEAR. THEY SAY HE NEVER TALKS. IF HE AGREES TO HELP, HE'LL JUST GIVE YOU HIS BUSINESS CARD--



HAVING DONE WHAT THE SHOPKEEPER TOLD HIM, KETTER NOW RETURNS TO THE CHURCH NEXT MIDNIGHT TO SEE IF--

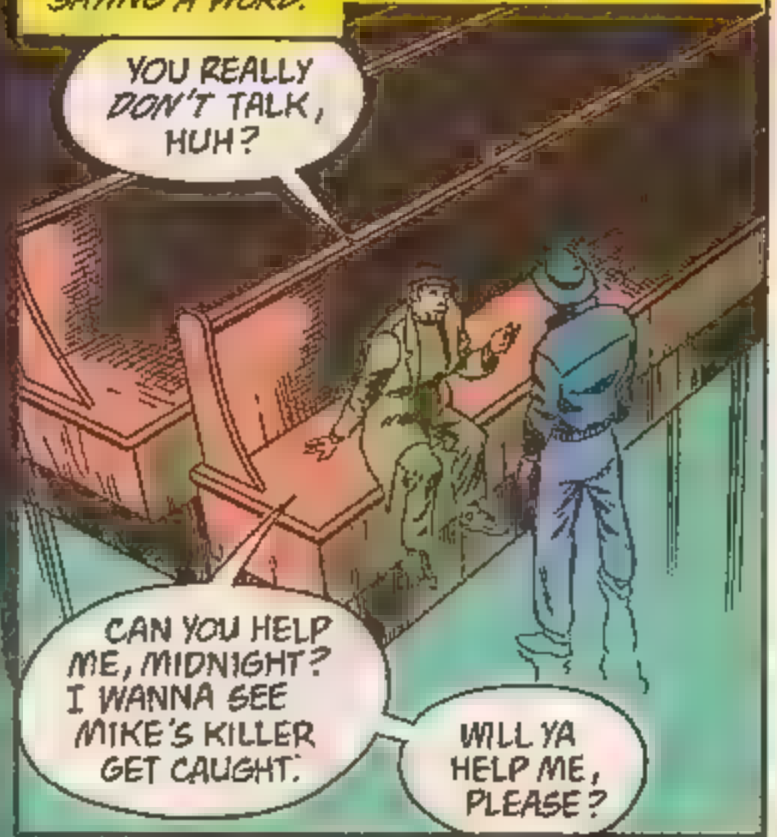




YOU
REALLY
DO
EXIST.

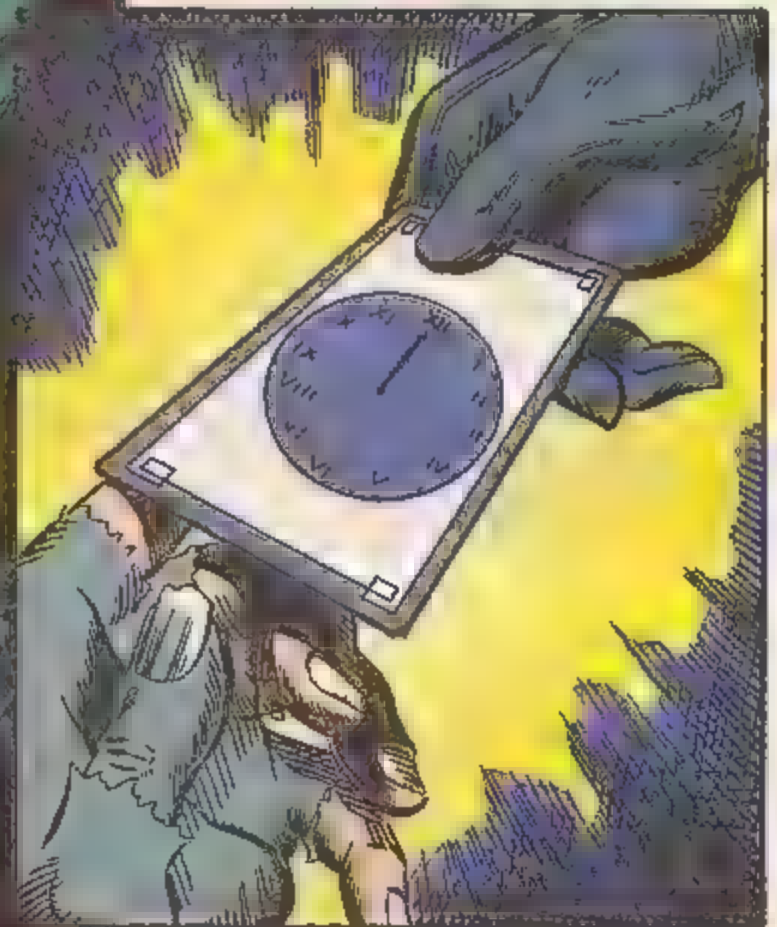
FOR THE NEXT TWENTY MINUTES, CLIFF
TALKS AND MIDNIGHT LISTENS, NEVER
SAYING A WORD.

YOU REALLY
DON'T TALK,
HUH?

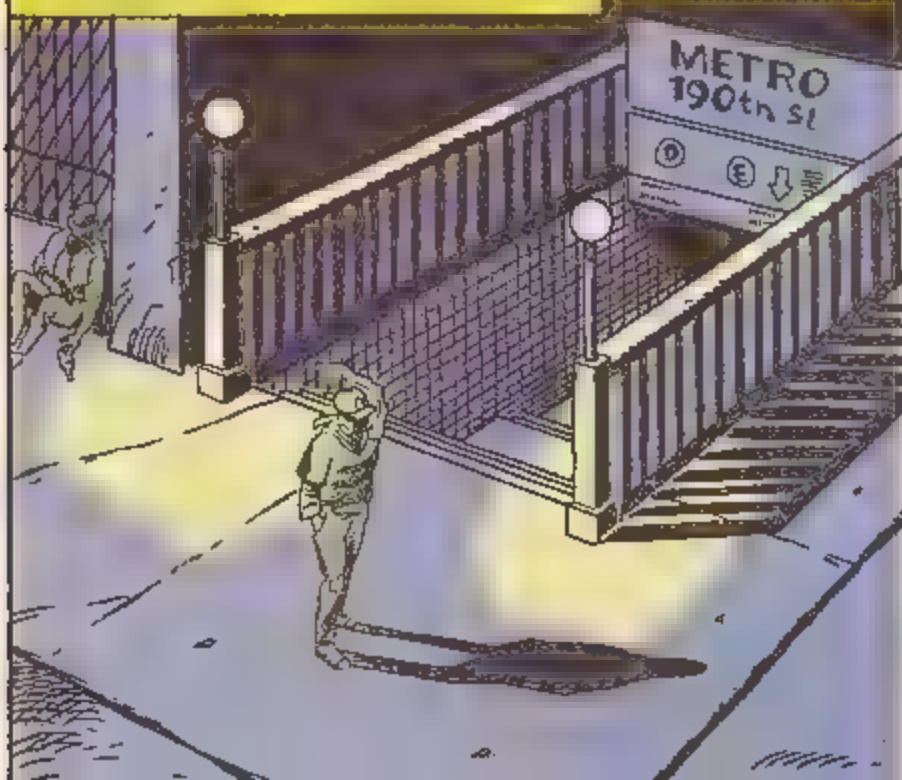


CAN YOU HELP
ME, MIDNIGHT?
I WANNA SEE
MIKE'S KILLER
GET CAUGHT.

WILL YA
HELP ME,
PLEASE?



AS ALWAYS, IN DISGUISE, MIDNIGHT SPENDS THE
NEXT THREE NIGHTS IN THE GHETTO WATCHING FOR
ANY SIGN OF DRIVE-BY KILLINGS.



BUT HE FINDS NOTHING UNTIL
LATE ON THE THIRD NIGHT--





KILLED ME : GULP :...
OUR FATHER WHO
ART IN...

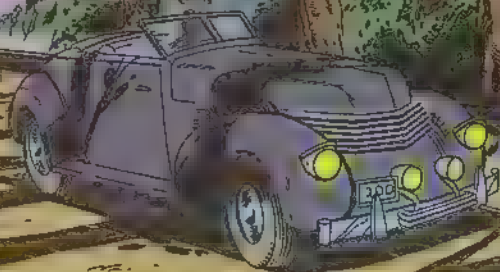
WHY
SOMEBODY
WANNA KILL
ME, MAN?...

... OUR FATHER WHO
ART IN... HELL, MAN,
IT GETTIN' SO
DARK...

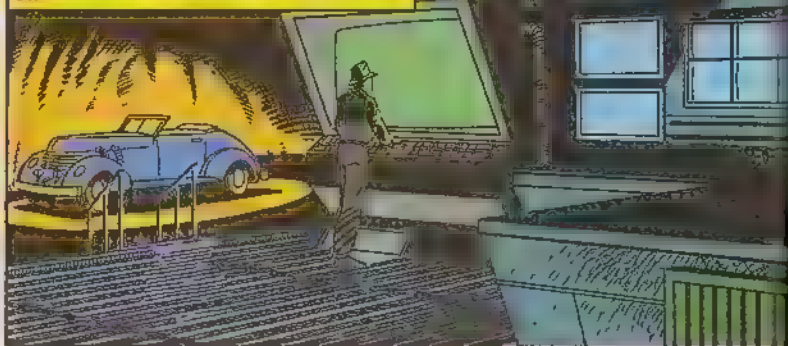
IT'S TOO LATE
TO HELP THIS
OLD MAN.
BUT NOT TOO
LATE TO HELP
OTHERS.



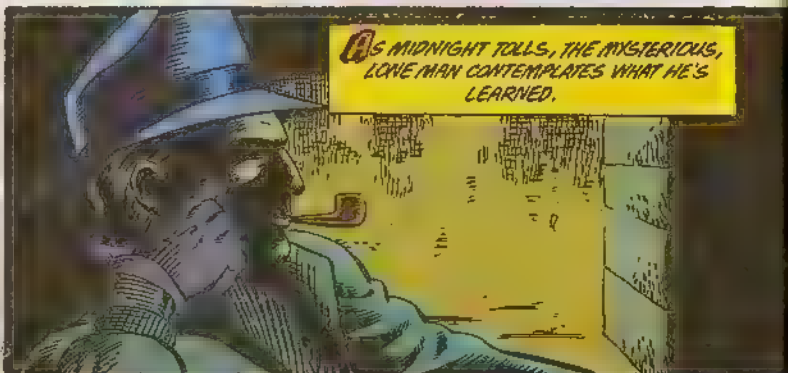
WATER



MUCH TO DO BEFORE SLEEP TONIGHT..



AS MIDNIGHT TOLLS, THE MYSTERIOUS, LONE MAN CONTEMPLATES WHAT HE'S LEARNED.

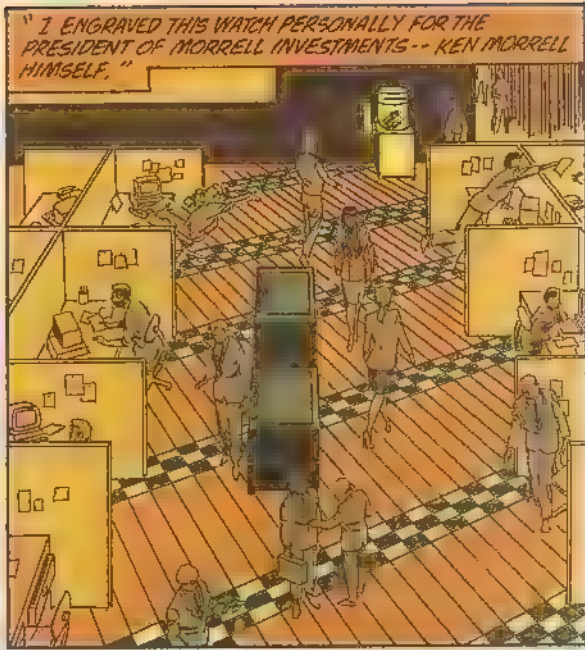


THE LICENSE PLATE WAS PHONEY-STOLEN FROM A DIFFERENT CAR AND PUT ON THE JUNKER.



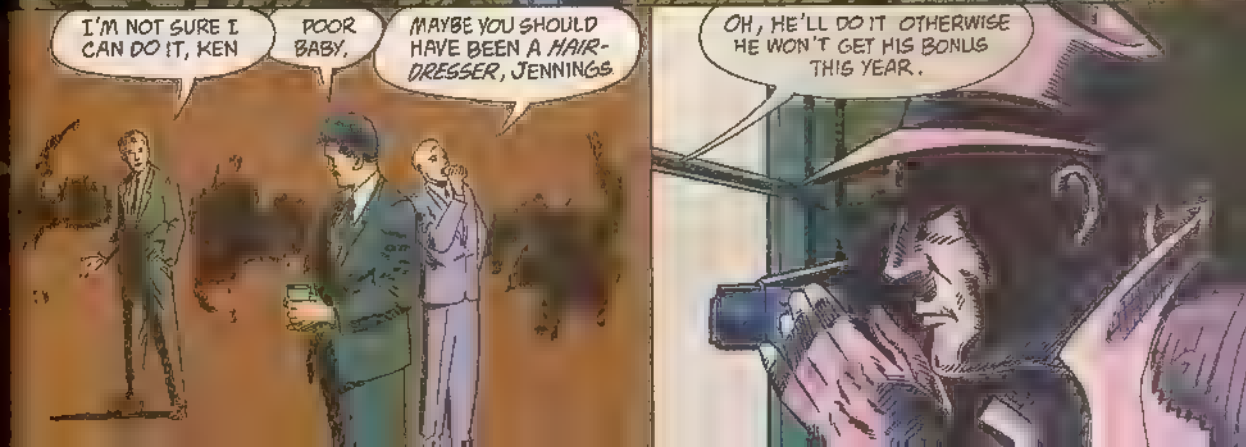
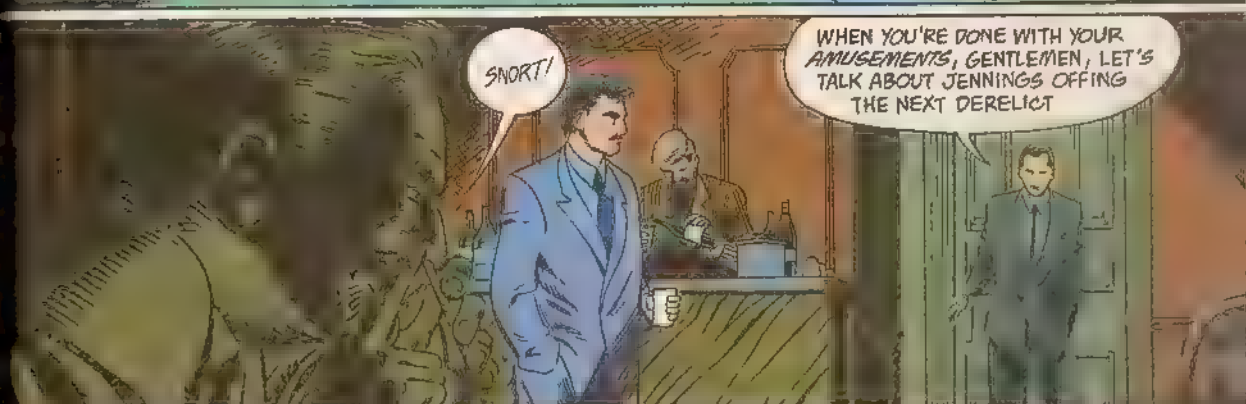
BUT THE WATCH BEARS A MOST CURIOUS INSCRIPTION..



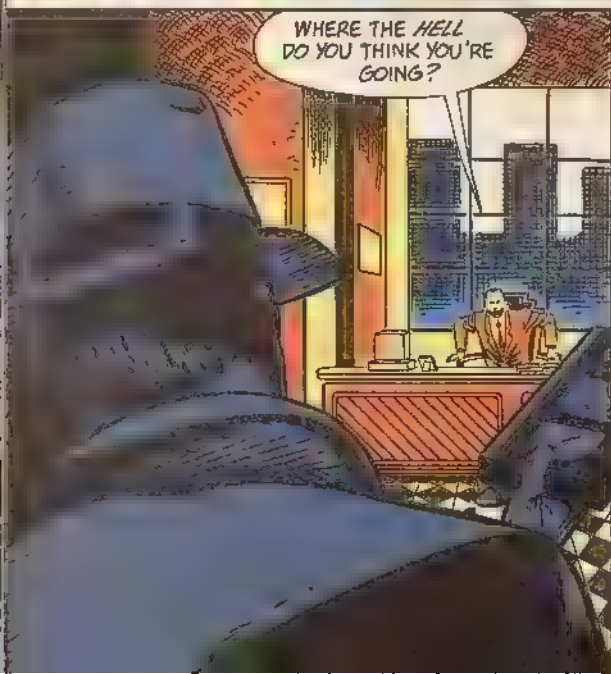
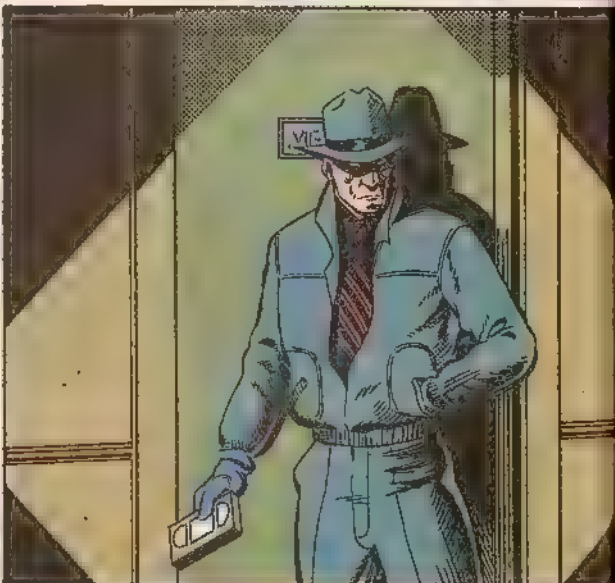
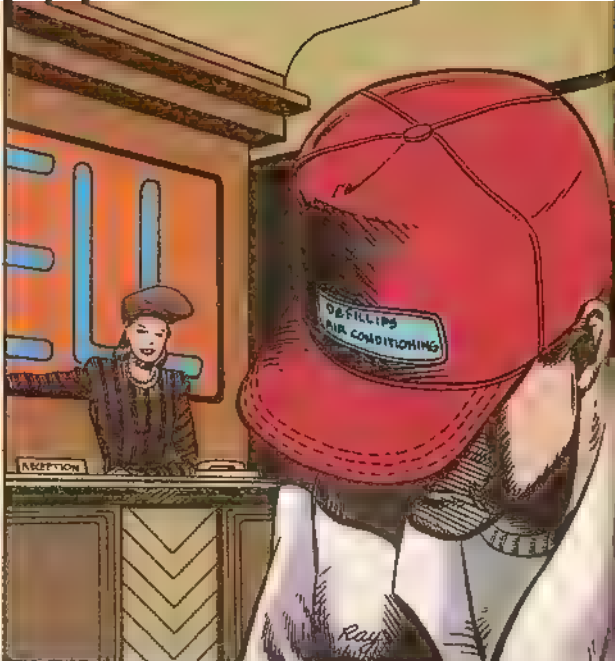


KEN MORRELL. THE COMMUNITY IS IN AWE OF HIM. AN INVESTMENT BROKER WHO MADE HIS FIRST BILLION BEFORE AGE THIRTY.

LATER THAT EVENING...



THE LOBBY OF THE MORRELL BUILDING --
AN AIR CONDITIONING REPAIRMAN WHO
LOOKS CURIOUSLY FAMILIAR...



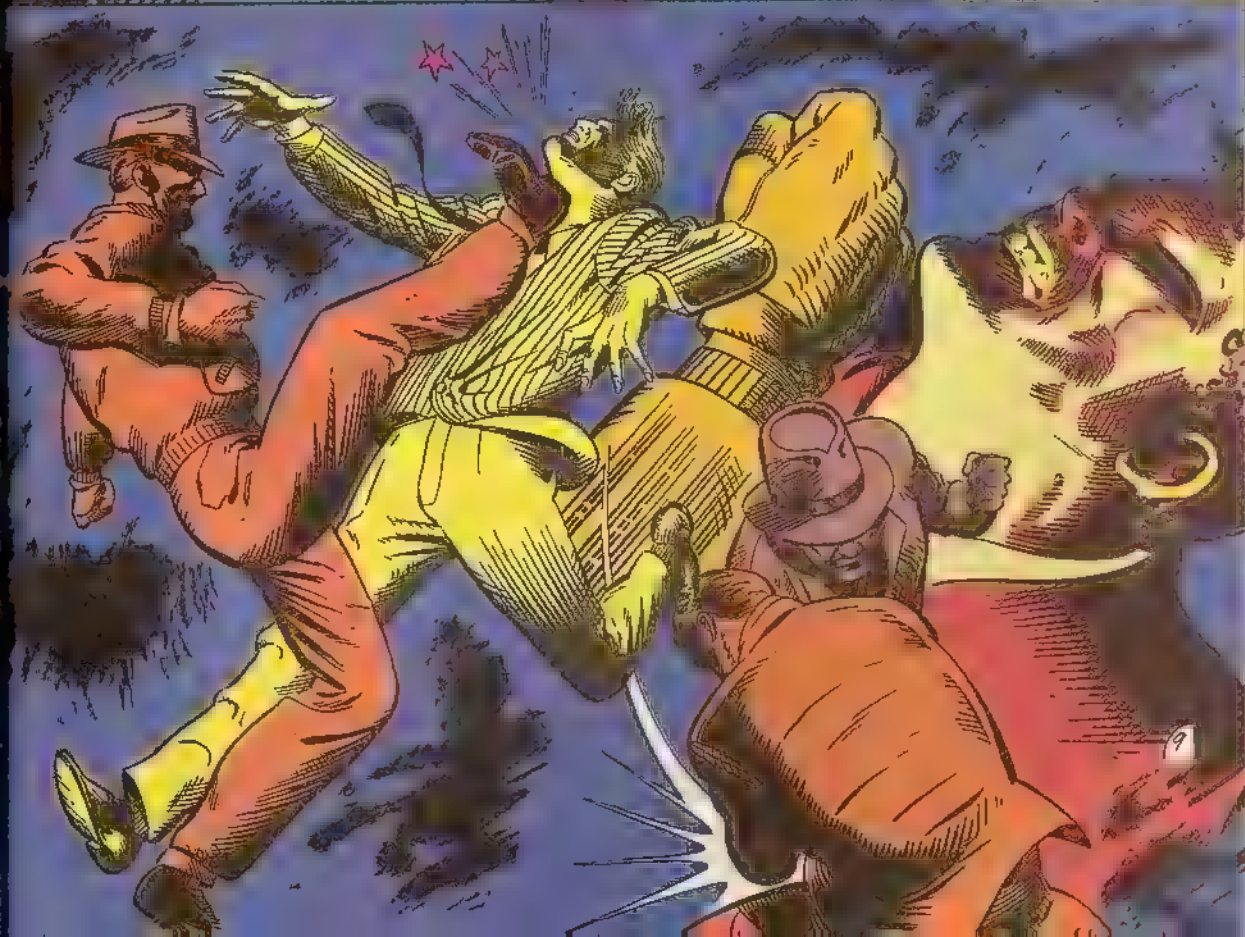
KEN'S RIGHT, JENNINGS. EACH OF US AGREED TO DISGUISE OURSELVES AND GO DOWN TO WINOVILLE AND KILL A DERELICT. THAT'S YOUR INITIATION INTO THE BILLIONAIRE'S BACHELOR CLUB. YOU EITHER DO IT OR YOU'RE NOT IN THE CLUB.



MORRELL'S ARM IS READY TO BREAK IN HALF.



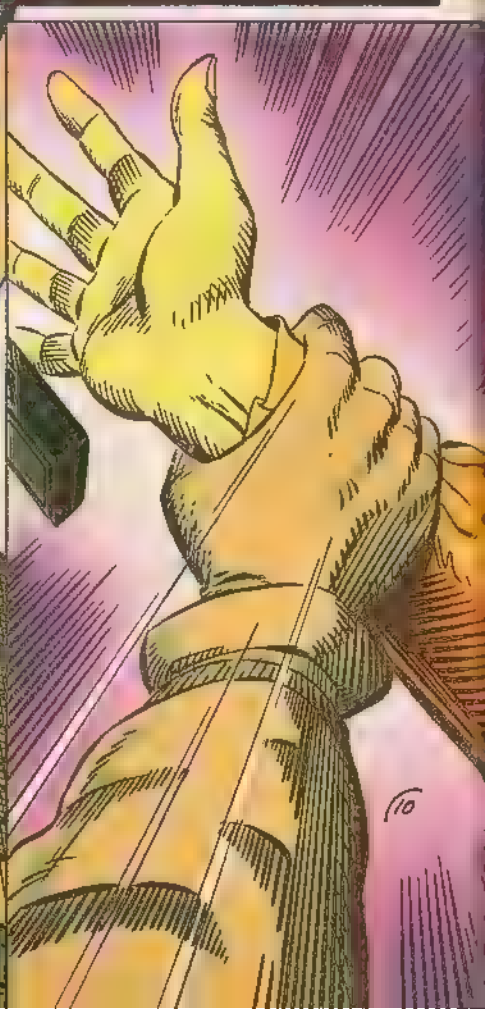
UH OH.

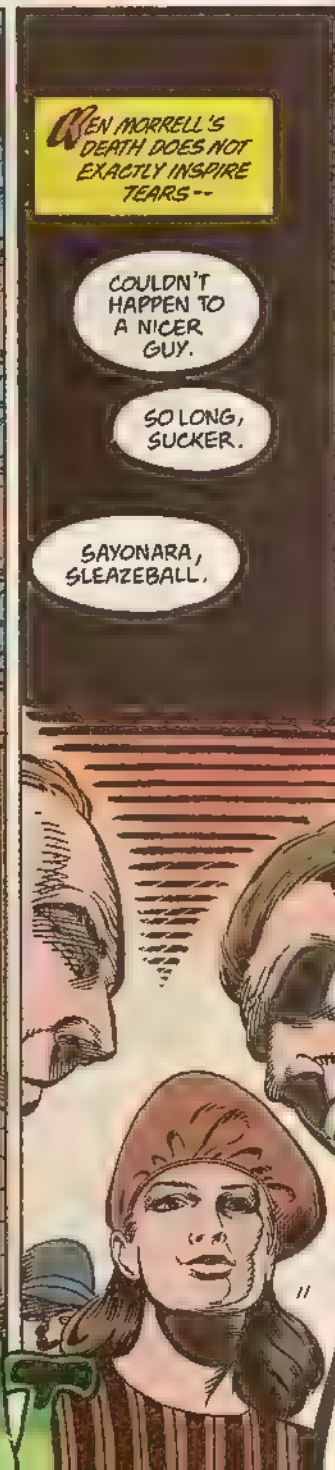
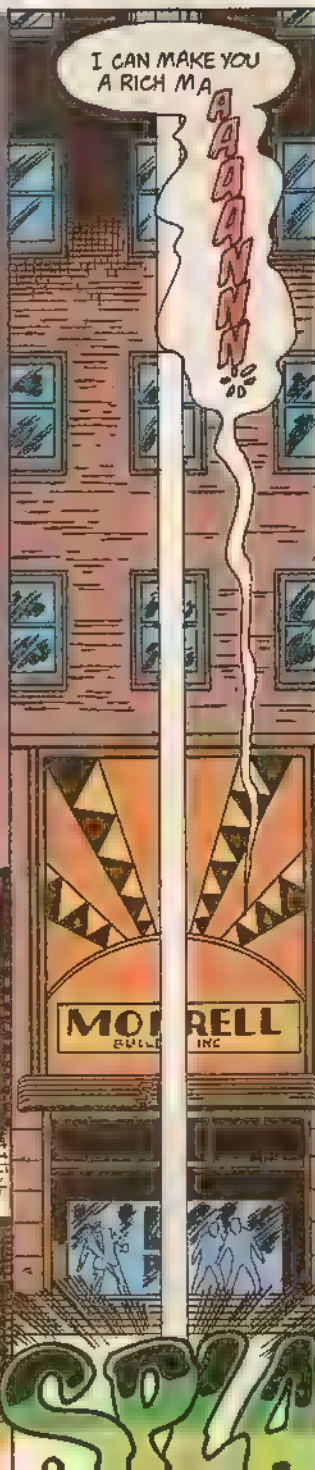
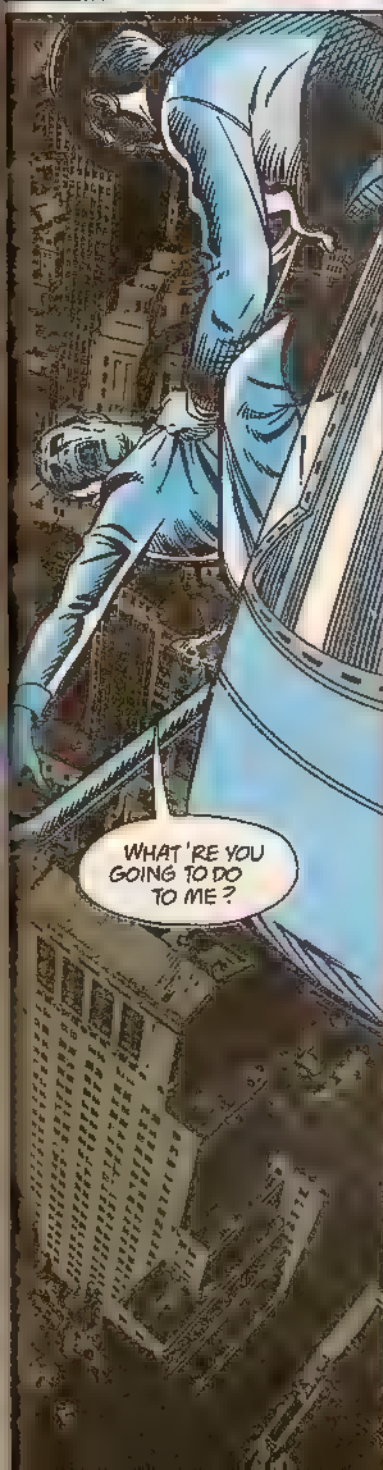
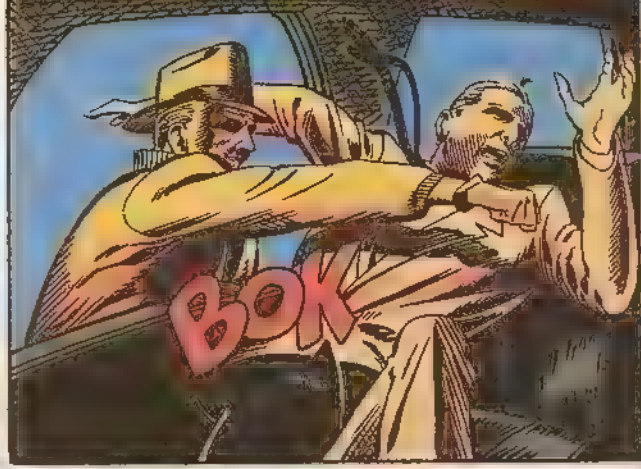


BETSY, SEND THE CHOPPER TO THE ROOF IN FIVE MINUTES!



YOU DO JUST WHAT I TELL YOU. YOU UNDERSTAND, CRETIN?





I CAN MAKE YOU
A RICH MA

I'VE GOT
MONEY.

WHAT'RE YOU
GOING TO DO
TO ME?

WEN MORRELL'S
DEATH DOES NOT
EXACTLY INSPIRE
TEARS--

COULDN'T
HAPPEN TO
A NICER
GUY.

SO LONG,
SUCKER.

SAYONARA,
SLEAZEBALL.

MORRELL
BUILDING

SPAT

GUESS IF YOU FOLKS
DON'T MIND, I'LL GET
ME SOME NEW
FOOTWEAR.

THE DEATH OF CLIFF KETTER'S FRIEND
HAS BEEN AVENGED. HE EVEN GOT
SOME NEW SHOES IN THE BARGAIN.



BUT NOW HE'S MORE
CURIOUS THAN EVER
ABOUT THE MAN WHO
HELPED HIM.

THE LONE, SILENT
MAN KNOWN ONLY
AS MIDNIGHT.



BATMAN
THE NAME

If they had attacked him, or if he had been wearing the mask and costume, he would have had no problem dealing with the three hulks who leapt at him and Alfred from the





Jacobs forced a chuckle.

"Tell me, does Dr. Cawthen do this sort of thing often?"

"I wouldn't know, sir. I've been in his employ less than a month. Is that all, Mr. Wayne?"

"Well, it *has* to be, I suppose."

Wayne snapped his fingers and the connection broke. For a moment, he stood staring at the shadowed roof of the cavern and listening to the faint *chirring* of the bats who lived there. It was time to act—and it was time to stop being Bruce Wayne.

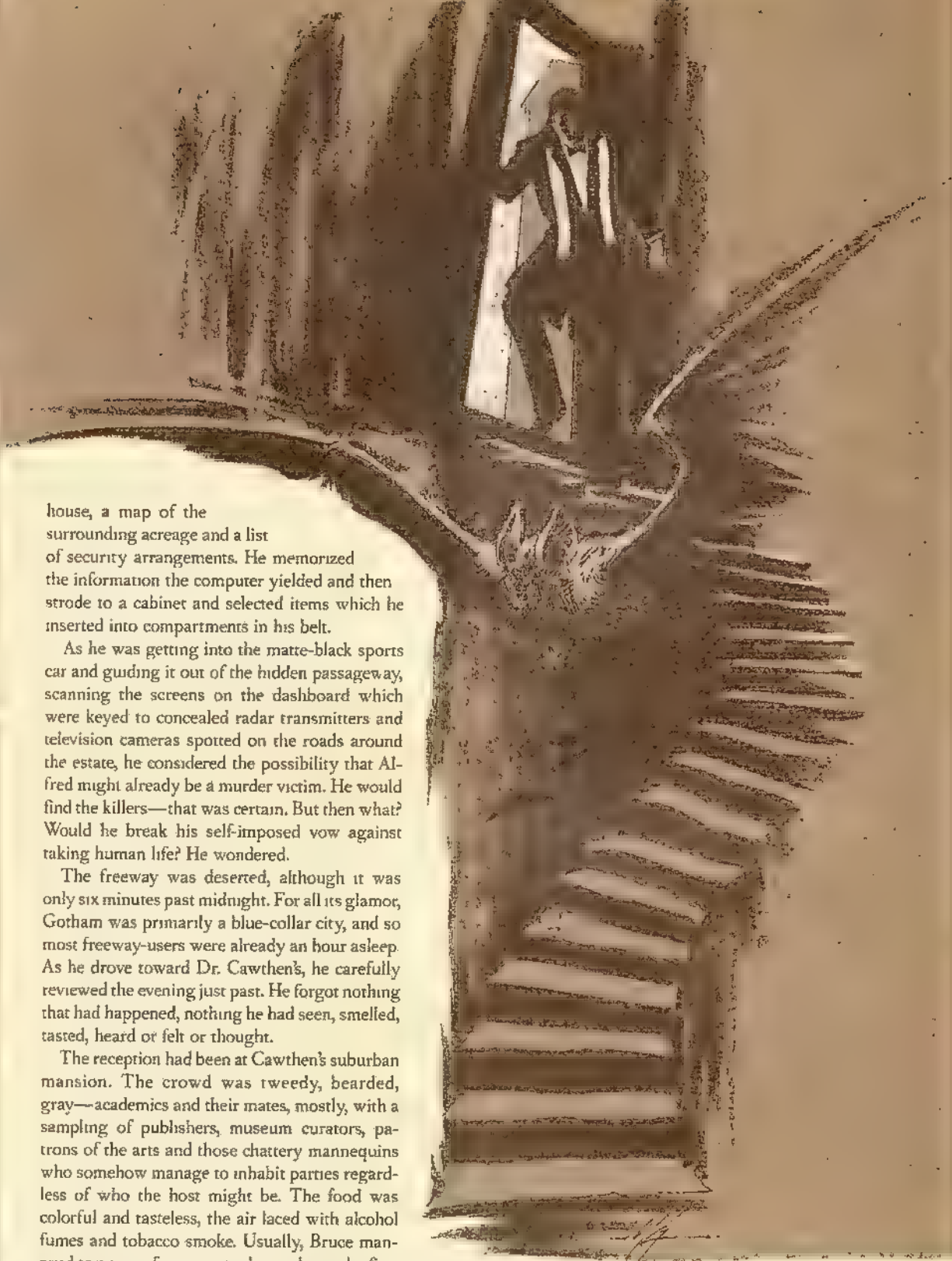
He shed his tuxedo. He pulled on the tights, the boots, the skin-tight tunic. He buckled the belt. He considered the capes hanging in a niche in the cave wall. He didn't know yet what action he would be taking before morning, and so he could not decide if he should choose the heavy leather cape with the kevlar panels for maximum protection or the featherweight nylon model for maximum movement. When in doubt, opt for mobility. He put on the nylon. Finally, and most important of all, the mask. He held it in front of his face for nearly a minute, staring into the empty eyeholes: a ritual, he realized—his own, intensely private preparation for the transformation—

With the mask in place, there was no Bruce Wayne. The handsome, unfocused, funny and sweet-tempered millionaire suddenly and utterly ceased to be. In his place, there was—an entity for which no name existed, really. But because it had to be called something, it was called the Batman.

Now it was moving outside the mansion to the bushes where the attackers had waited, playing a powerful flashlight over the ground, dropping bits of greenery into a plastic evidence bag, reading the signs, the crushed grass, the tracks in the snow, the damp soil. Three of them. Waited less than fifteen minutes. Two were large men, over two hundred pounds, over six feet tall, and the third was smaller—five-ten, one sixty. He knew all this, of course; he had *seen* the attackers. But he would not assume his knowledge was accurate until it was confirmed.

Back in the cave, he dropped the plastic bag onto a lab table. He could run tests and analyses, and almost certainly they would provide information, but they would take time and that made them a last resort. He might not *have* time.

He went to the work station of the computer bank and accessed the Cawthen file. He was particularly interested in the floor plan of Cawthen's



house, a map of the surrounding acreage and a list of security arrangements. He memorized the information the computer yielded and then strode to a cabinet and selected items which he inserted into compartments in his belt.

As he was getting into the matte-black sports car and guiding it out of the hidden passageway, scanning the screens on the dashboard which were keyed to concealed radar transmitters and television cameras spotted on the roads around the estate, he considered the possibility that Alfred might already be a murder victim. He would find the killers—that was certain. But then what? Would he break his self-imposed vow against taking human life? He wondered.

The freeway was deserted, although it was only six minutes past midnight. For all its glamor, Gotham was primarily a blue-collar city, and so most freeway-users were already an hour asleep. As he drove toward Dr. Cawthen's, he carefully reviewed the evening just past. He forgot nothing that had happened, nothing he had seen, smelled, tasted, heard or felt or thought.

The reception had been at Cawthen's suburban mansion. The crowd was tweedy, bearded, gray—academics and their mates, mostly, with a sampling of publishers, museum curators, patrons of the arts and those chattering mannequins who somehow manage to inhabit parties regardless of who the host might be. The food was colorful and tasteless, the air laced with alcohol fumes and tobacco smoke. Usually, Bruce managed to appear for a quarter hour, charm the first ten people he met, make a dinner date with an attractive woman that he would later, with abject apology, break, and exit leaving the impression that he had been present for hours and had hugely enjoyed himself. Cawthen's soirée, however, was a bit more interesting, it merited a genuine visit. For one thing, it was occasioned by the discovery in a Scottish culvert of a seventeenth century manuscript titled *The Presents of the Venerable Order of the Black Rose*.

Bruce remembered Alfred's explanation: "The Order of the Black Rose was a secret society founded in 1457 at the court of George the Third. Its original purpose is lost to posterity, but what it became is unfortunately not. A bunch of bloody, ruthless



using pa-
triotism as
an excuse for
dispatching ene-
mies. Horrible buggers.

Imagine a combination of Hitler's
SS, the hooded gentlemen of the
burning crosses and a band of com-
close. They were finally disbanded after
lor and exposed them. The name of the traitor was

"Fascinating, Alfred," Bruce said. "But what has this to

"Unfortunately, one of my ancestors, Alphonse Pen-
have been Alphonse who betrayed his fellows. At least, he
pardoned."

"I've never been able to decide. Historians can't agree about
who did not realize the Order's real purposes. The other half say
on the Order, he put an end to the Order's wickedness. But he did it

mon street muggers and you would be
one of their number went to the chancel-
never discovered."
do with you?"

nyworth, was a member. In fact, it may
was only one of two members who were
"Would that make him a hero or a villain?"
him, you see. Half consider him a fool, a dupe
he was shrewd and self-serving. If he informed
by committing the most heinous of crimes, be-



"I had my people research him," the speaker continued. "Strange old duck. Eccentric, secretive. He knows stuff from a letter that was accidentally destroyed a couple of years ago. Never told anyone what it is, never wrote it down. Apparently, it's necessary to understand this code."

"Have we met?" Bruce asked

"Name's Maxwellian. Randall Maxwellian. And you're Wayne—see your picture in the paper now and then. I've often thought I could do you some good—image-wise, I mean. Alfred Pennyworth."

"Nice to meet you. This"—Bruce nodded to Alfred—"is my friend

"Not friend," Alfred told Maxwellian. "Butler. I am Master Wayne's butler."

"The other descendant! Well, what are you betting, Pennyworth? Who did it, your ancestor or mine?"

"I reserve my opinion."

"Me, I think old Aldebert Maxwellian was the whistle-blower. I had my people research this and frankly, Alphonse Pennyworth seems like a weak sister. Spineless type."

Bruce saw Alfred stiffen. *So Alfred has family pride. In all these years, I never suspected*

"Are you a cattleman?" Bruce asked.

"Why do you think that? Oh, the clothes. No, I'm an image consultant. Opened a branch in Fort Worth a couple of weeks ago and decided I should go native."

"The Texas businessmen I've met tend to blue flannel," Alfred said.

"Maybe you've only met the dull ones."

"Or those with taste."

"Listen, you skinny—"

Bruce stepped between Alfred and Randall Maxwellian. "It's been a pleasure, Mr. Maxwellian.

there's a young

Now, if you'll excuse us, lady I've promised to meet in the city."

Alfred insisted on driving home—

"Appearances must be maintained," he said when Bruce protested—and so Bruce allowed himself to sink into the leather upholstery of the limousine. For a while, he watched large, flat

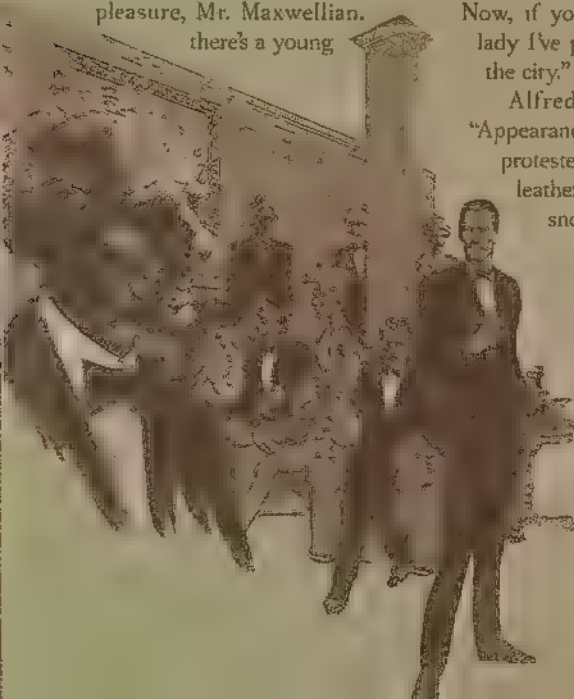
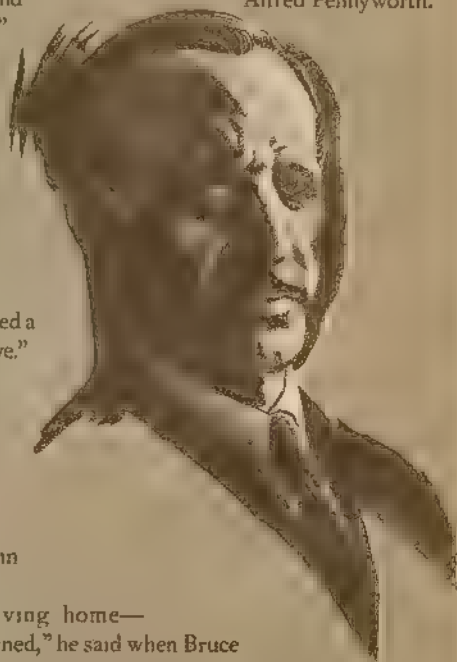
snowflakes flare in the limo's headlights, savoring the quiet. The snow shower was brief, however, over in five minutes. As Alfred drove through the estate's huge iron gate, he said, "I suppose the break in the weather means you'll be leaving again—not that a little thing like a storm ever inhibits your nocturnal activity."

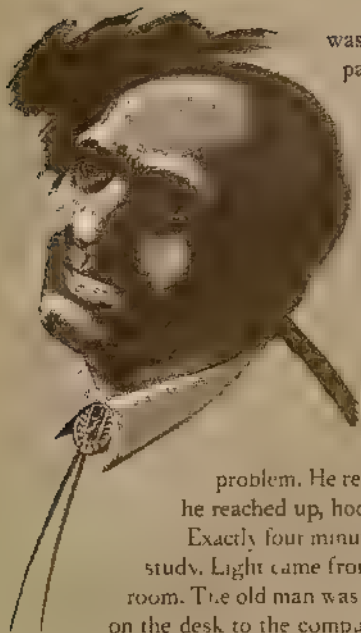
"Not tonight, Alfred. I really haven't had much sleep in the past four days—"

"Ah, yes. The contretemps with the Penguin."

"Yes. And since our friend Mr. Cobblepot is reestablished in the Gotham House of Detention, I think I'll give myself a night off. Maybe read a couple of books and turn in early."

Bad prophecy. Now, three hours later, he was returning to Cawthen's with only 53 seconds' rest. He realized that Alfred's abduction might have nothing to do with Cawthen, but that





was unlikely and, lacking anyplace else to begin, he would question the old scholar. He parked the car in the shadows alongside the high stone wall that surrounded Cawthen's estate, set its alarms, and, after a moment's concentration, bounded from the top of the car to the top of the wall and over. He landed lightly, his fingers already removing a thin aerosol container from his belt. The two German shepherds bounded around the corner of the house. When they were about six feet away, the Batman pressed the top of the aerosol and the dogs stopped, relaxed, whimpered and collapsed onto the grass. They would be unconscious for approximately two hours.

The Batman glided to the house and looked up at a single rectangle of light high in a tower, five stories above the ground. If he tried to reach it from inside, he would have to deal with a battery of burglar alarms, a butler, a chauffeur, a secretary and a hired security guard. This he could do with no uncommon effort, but it would take time and that was exactly what he might not have.

He pulled off a glove and felt the masonry of the wall with his bare fingers. No problem. He removed his other glove, folded it with its mate and tucked both under his belt. Then he reached up, hooked his fingers into a space between the stones, and began climbing.

Exactly four minutes later, he was perched on a sill peering through a window into Anders Cawthen's study. Light came from a single circular fluorescent bulb in a reflector above a desk in the center of the room. The old man was hunched over a computer keyboard, his gaze swiveling from a sheet of parchment on the desk to the computer screen. As the Batman watched, he pressed a key and peered intently at the screen for a moment before returning his attention to the parchment.

The window opened easily and the Batman slipped into the room. Cawthen's head jerked around and he gasped.

"Please don't be alarmed, Doctor," the Batman said pleasantly. "I won't keep

"Who are you?" the old man rasped.

"Call me the Batman. I'd like to ask you a question, if I may."

"I can't stop you, can I?"

"Then do it quickly and get out."

"I'm offering you a large sum to decode the Presents—"

"I'll probably be dead before the check gets written. Paying the Gotham Birdwatching

"Who is offering the money?"

"None of your business."

The Batman knelt by an electrical outlet and fingered a length of wire that ran from it to the computer. He looked up at Cawthen and smiled. "I understand that when the power to a computer is interrupted, whatever's in the machine is lost. Hours of labor sometimes. Is that correct, Doctor?"

"You wouldn't dare."

The Batman tugged at the wire. "I will do anything I must. Absolutely anything."

"No, no," Cawthen gasped, and coughed for almost a minute. When he had regained his breath, he said, "It's Haliburt. Acton Haliburt."

"Sir Acton Haliburt? The British industrialist?"

"Yes, yes. Now I've given you the name. Get out!"

"In a moment. Why is this translation so important to him?"

"Because the name of the man who betrayed the Order of the Black Rose is in it."

"And do you have any idea what that name might be?"

"One of two. Either Alphonse Pennyworth or Aldebert Maxwellian."

"Why does Haliburt care about the name?"

"How the devil should I know?"

"Guess, or—" The Batman curled the wire around his forefinger.

"The Royal Court sent one of Haliburt's ancestors to the gallows at the Tower of London. As the noose was being put around his neck, he made his sons swear vengeance. Each succeeding generation of male Haliburts have renewed the vow. I suppose that includes Acton Haliburt."

"So he wants to make good on a promise that's hundreds of years old?"

"I suppose."

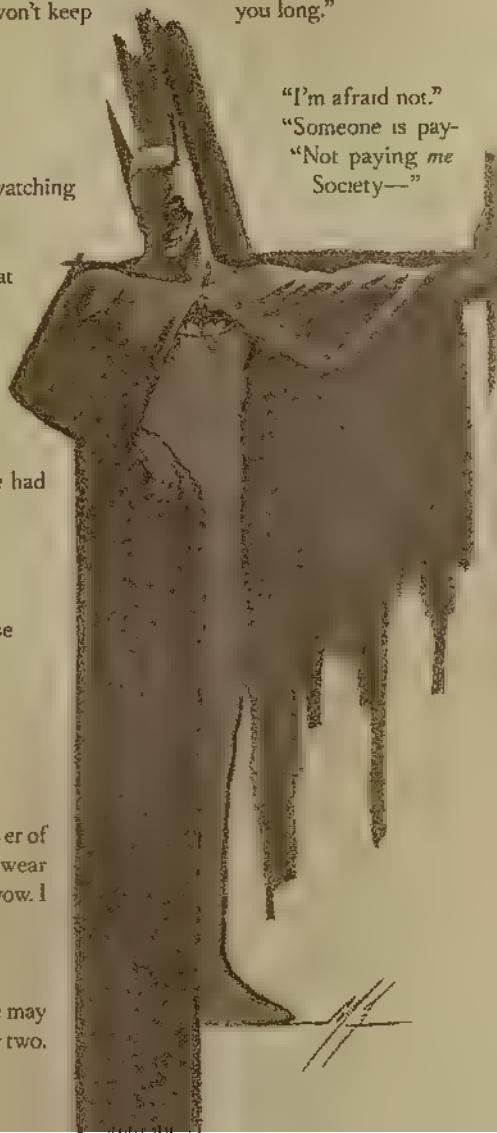
The Batman let the wire drop to the floor and stood. "Doctor, a man's life may be in danger. You've got to delay completing your translation at least a day or two.

you long."

"I'm afraid not."

"Someone is pay-

"Not paying me
Society—"





I shouldn't need more than that—less, in fact—”

“I *can't*,” Cawthen shouted, the hoarse voice suddenly charged with passion. “I am *dying*. By rights, I should already be dead. At any second I may be. I am only able to function because of pain killers.”

Witness glistened in his eyes. “And, you see, I have spent my life and most of my inheritance studying the Order of the Black Rose. I have allowed it to be the center of my existence. I have never had a wife, children, even any close friends. Oh, I was foolish, I can see that now. But it is too late to change and I *must know*. I must know who the traitor was. Can you understand? Can you possibly comprehend what it is to be in the grasp of an all-consuming obsession?”

The Batman put his hand on the old man's shoulder and said, “Yes.” Then he stepped back and said, “Lie. Give Haliburt a third name.”

“He would not be fooled. He is as familiar with the Order as I am.”

“Finish the decoding but tell Haliburt you haven't.”

“This”—Cawthen touched the computer—“makes that impossible. It is connected by telephone to a duplicate machine in Haliburt's possession. He is able to follow my labors as I perform them.”

The Batman pondered. He could put Cawthen to sleep easily enough, but if the scholar was as ill as he claimed—and, looking at him, the Batman did not doubt it—even minor violence might be too much. He could destroy the computer. But how would his unseen enemy react? It was a chance he dare not take.

He unwrapped a thin polymer line from around his waist, tied one end to a radiator, and sprang to the window sill.

“I can't wish you good luck, Doctor. But I regret that.”

He stepped out of the window.

Back in the car, he tapped a number into a cellular telephone and accessed the vast data bank in the batcave. A screen on the dashboard brightened and a small keyboard slid from under it. He typed. Letters began popping onto the screen. Within five minutes he knew that Anson Haliburt had been twice committed to a mental hospital outside London and that there was a history of violent psychosis in his family. Did that mean Haliburt was capable of murder? The Batman tapped another telephone number and listened to a buzzing. Then: “Hello?”

“Commissioner, it's me.”

“At two in the morning, who else would it be?”

“I need information.”

“Go on.”

“A man named Maxwellian may have been kidnapped last night—”

“He was. The call came in an hour ago. Guy was grabbed outside his apartment building at about midnight. Witness was walking his dog, said the kidnappers pulled up in a dark blue Chevy sedan a minute or two before Maxwellian arrived. A doorman tried to intervene, got shot to death for his trouble.”

That answers my question, the Batman told himself. The kidnappers are willing to murder.

“... dog walker said there were three attackers,” Commissioner James Gordon was saying. “Got away in a dark blue sedan, probably rented. We're checking. You know anything about this?”

“You might find out where Acton Haliburt is. I'm guessing he's somewhere near Gotham.”

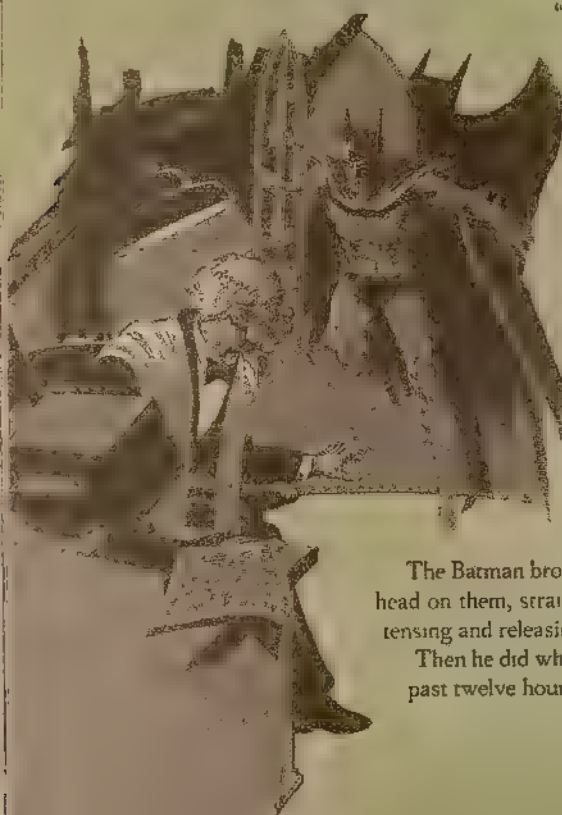
“Okay, I'll get someone on it. But why?”

“I have reason to believe Haliburt is behind the abduction.”

“Listen, I've got to have—”

The Batman broke the connection. He put his forearms on the steering wheel, rested his head on them, straightened and began breathing deeply. Slowly, systematically, he began tensing and releasing his muscles. When his body was fully relaxed, his mind had calmed.

Then he did what only he knew he did best: he thought. Let his memory range over the past twelve hours, reviewed events, considered possible meanings, allowed connections



to form. Part of the answer lay in the brief storm, of course: *No dry spots on the asphalt. Which meant the kidnappers had parked behind Wayne Manor only a short time before we were attacked. If they'd been there any longer, their car would have shielded the ground and I would have seen its shape in the snow. And the kidnapper's sedan stopped in front of Maxwellian's building very shortly before he arrived. They must have known when we left the party, when Maxwellian left—*

He looked up, past the wall, to the lighted window in the tower. *How are Cawthen's labors going? Has he finished? Has he found the name?*

Such speculation was pointless, a stupid distraction. His own labor was all that was important. *Get back to it. Somebody at the party must have informed the kidnappers. But there were at least fifty people present. Who were they? Respected academics, their wives, their lovers, Alfred, Maxwellian, Cawthen himself, me, and—*

And the caterers, and guests' drivers and one other. No proof that he was Haliburt's man, but this wasn't a court of law. The Batman picked up his phone, tapped a number, waited, recognized the voice that mumbled a sleepy hello and said, "Listen, it's gone sour. No time to explain—the police are on their way. You'd better leave immediately. Go to Haliburt. He'll give you instructions."

"Who are you?" The voice was no longer sleepy.

"Who the bloody hell do you *think* I am? Get moving."

The Batman dropped the phone. It was pure bluff, and there were a dozen ways it could fail, but it was the only chance he had.

Less than five minutes later, a dark green Volvo sped from Cawthen's property and turned onto the road a dozen yards from where the Batman waited. The Batman followed, not using his headlights; instead, he polarized the windshield and switched on the infrared beams. It was a short journey. The Volvo stopped near a white Pontiac and a dark blue Chevrolet near a deserted gas station at an intersection four miles off the newly-built freeway. The building was not much more than a shed; the windows were covered with slabs of plywood, an ancient sign hung from one corner and weeds were growing through cracks in the concrete driveway.

Pretty crummy hideout for a millionaire madman.

His quarry had entered the station through a side door. Normally, the Batman would have reconnoitered the area, planned several alternative attacks, but it would take the man only seconds to discover that he had been duped, seconds more to recover, and then—?

I may already be too late. Cawthen may have found his answer while I was driving here.

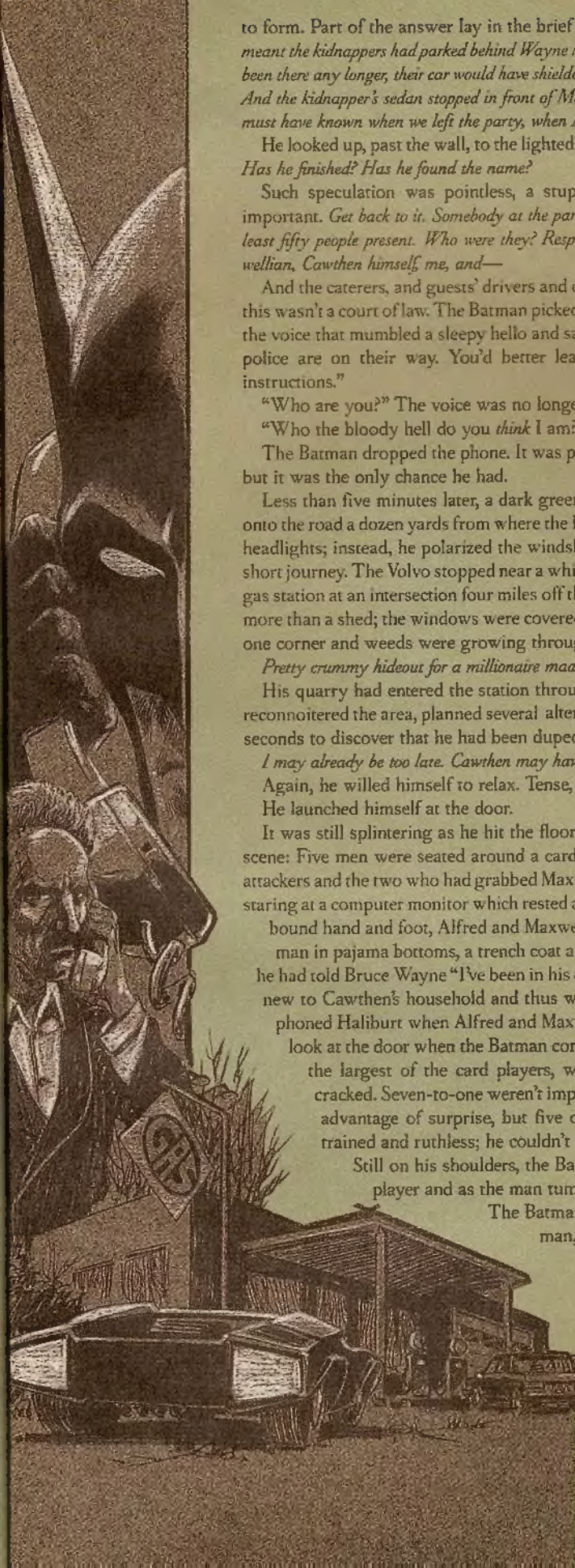
Again, he willed himself to relax. Tense, he would be more likely to make a mistake.

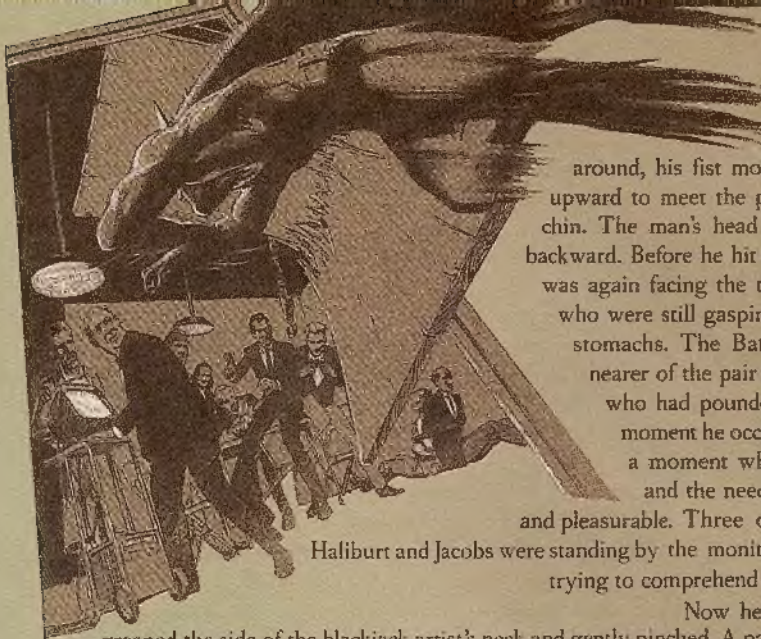
He launched himself at the door.

It was still splintering as he hit the floor inside and rolled, and as he did, he registered the scene: Five men were seated around a card table littered with ashtrays and bottles (his three attackers and the two who had grabbed Maxwellian); a fat man in a brown suit (surely Haliburt) staring at a computer monitor which rested atop an old battery cart; and, on the floor in a corner, bound hand and foot, Alfred and Maxwellian (alive). And, standing next to Haliburt, a thin man in pajama bottoms, a trench coat and house slippers (Jacobs, the secretary who, when he had told Bruce Wayne "I've been in his employ less than a month" had revealed that he was new to Cawthen's household and thus was probably Haliburt's pawn, the person who had phoned Haliburt when Alfred and Maxwellian left the party). All of them were turning to look at the door when the Batman completed his roll and planted both feet in the chest of the largest of the card players, who was half-standing, reaching for his hip. Ribs cracked. Seven-to-one weren't impossible odds, particularly when the Batman had the advantage of surprise, but five of his opponents were competent thugs, probably trained and ruthless; he couldn't afford restraint.

Still on his shoulders, the Batman booted the chair from under the second card player and as the man tumbled, kicked him precisely under the jaw.

The Batman arched his body and sprang to his feet. The third man, whose right arm was in a sling, and the fourth had revolvers almost clear of shoulder holsters. The Batman shoved the table into their bellies and, as they gasped and bent over, swept the table in a wide arc behind him; its edge struck the fifth man in the chin as he was aiming a Glock automatic at the Batman's head. The gun fired high, the slug passing





well over its target,
and the Batman let
the momentum of
the table spin him

around, his fist moving out and slightly upward to meet the point of the gunman's chin. The man's head snapped and he fell backward. Before he hit the floor, the Batman was again facing the third and fourth men, who were still gasping and clutching their stomachs. The Batman recognized the nearer of the pair as the blackjack artist who had pounded his skull. It was a moment he occasionally experienced, a moment when adrenaline surged and the need for revenge was hot and pleasurable. Three of them were down.

Haliburt and Jacobs were standing by the monitor, unarmed, staring, trying to comprehend what was happening.

Now he *could* afford restraint.

He reached out,
The man sighed
and crumpled.

The Batman could never allow himself to experience any satisfaction whatever from violence—not without the terrible risk of becoming what he despised.

"I give up." That was from the man with the broken arm, still clutching himself, backing away from the Batman.

"Very wise." The Batman produced handcuffs from under his cape and tossed them to the kidnapper. "Put these on and wait for the police."

The Batman did not wait to see if he was obeyed.

He turned. Jacobs was staring at him, Haliburt at the monitor.

"He's doing it," Haliburt whispered. "He's broken the code and he's getting the *name*."

Haliburt would be arrested, would perhaps be held by the authorities. But he was rich, and the wealthy had resources; bail would be set, bonds paid, vastly competent attorneys enlisted. Even if he were imprisoned, he could maintain his vendetta—

On the screen, the letters were appearing slowly, as though the person typing them were taking enormous care:

TRAITOR'S NAME IS AL

The Batman put the sole of his boot against the battery cart and straightened his leg. The cart bumped a few feet across the floor, hit a crack in the concrete and tipped—

"No!" Haliburt shrieked, raising his bulk from the chair.

The Batman shoved him back.

And the monitor toppled and hit the floor and exploded. The lights flickered. Haliburt stared at the litter that had been the computer.

"I'll get the name—I will," he mumbled.

"Perhaps," the Batman replied.

He knelt by the prisoners and a few seconds later they were free.

"Lissen, fella, I've got to thank you," Maxwellian said, rubbing his wrists.

"Don't bother," the Batman said.

He stepped to the door and faded into the darkness.

"—according to the morning newscast, poor old Cawthen was found sprawled on the floor by his computer," Alfred was saying as he stirred waffle batter the next day. "They say the machine was shut off."

"Uh huh," Bruce said over the rim of his orange juice glass.

"I wonder how he felt, those last few seconds."

"I imagine he died happy—at least, he had a smile on his face."

"Master Bruce, how could you possibly . . . oh, certainly. You were there."

"Someone had to turn off Cawthen's computer."

"Then you saw the name?"

Bruce was silent.

"But you won't tell me what it was."

"Only if you really want me to. Do you?"

"Some day, perhaps. When I have finally decided."

"Decided what, Alfred?"

"Which is worse, ignorance or malice."



MS. TREE

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On the road back to our roots, somebody took a left turn.

Back in the very early 1930s, there were no comics collectors shops. In fact, there were no comic books *per se* — a few reprint collections of popular newspaper strips, but they weren't in any sort of magazine form, and they weren't published periodically.

However, there were the heroic character pulps. The Shadow, Doc Savage, The Spider... the list goes on and on. These magazines contained a long prose story (with illustrations) featuring the cover-named character and his inevitable cohorts. Each issue was rounded out by a couple of backup stories that maintained the lead feature's tone.

The pulps were these massive suckers, made thick not really by the page count but by the pulpwood paper they used. To paraphrase Bill Cosby, you could actually see the chunks of wood floating in the paper.

Despite their enormous influence on pop culture, they really didn't last all that long. However, as it often has been pointed out — most eloquently by Jim Steranko in the first volume of his *History of Comics* — there is a direct connection between the hero pulps and comics. They were so successful that, when the comics publishers that started up in the mid-1930s (many of whom were printing pulps as well) ran out of newspaper strip material to reprint, they took their lead from the hero pulps. Quite literally, the hero pulps gave birth to the hero comics.

In the ensuing five decades, the hero pulps evolved into the hero paperbacks (the likes of Doc Savage, The Spider, and Operator 5 gave way to the likes of Mike Hammer, James Bond, and Matt Helm), and the anthology comic gave way to the one-feature comic.

What you're holding is *something* of a return to our roots: a magazine cover-featuring an extremely hard-boiled hero who dominates the page count, backed by two short stories.

Of course, we're keeping the comics format. Mostly.

MS. TREE QUARTERLY is indeed a comic book, but one that takes much of its influence from the old heroic character pulps.

* * * * *

Our lead feature, Ms. Tree, is hardly a new-born babe. Indeed, she was the first

successful ongoing feature to be produced in the 1980s — DC and Marvel included — to make it to the 1990s. She got her start in the old *Eclipse Monthly*, and went on to star in 50 issues of her own comic book.

The creation of Max Allan Collins and Terry Beatty, Ms. Tree clearly wears her influences on her sleeve: the hardboiled private eyes, with a touch of Mickey Spillane and a dash of *Dragnet*. Well, maybe more than just a touch and a dash. Unrelenting, undaunting and extremely compelling, Ms. Tree has been the most enduring leading private detective in the history of comic books. Only DETECTIVE COMICS' Slam Bradley — a back-up feature — survived longer... and Ms. Tree's breathing down his neck.

At the time of her creation, Beatty was well known for his work as a cartoonist and columnist for the *Comics Buyer's Guide*. And by that point, Collins had about a dozen or so mysteries and thrillers under his belt — not to mention several years of writing *Dick Tracy* for the newspapers. Since creating this feature, Collins and Beatty managed to find time to create WILD DOG for DC; Max has written about a million more novels, including the award-winning Nate Heller series. (Don't worry, we'll be plugging Max's upcoming novels as they come out — right now, his adaptation of the Dick Tracy movie is about to hit the stores, and his fourth Nate Heller novel, *Neon Mirage*, will be out in paperback this coming winter; a new Heller novel has been completed and will be appearing in hardcover at about that same time).

I don't want to give Ms. Tree short shrift, but her nearly ten years of publication speaks for itself. Instead, I want to spend a bit of our precious space talking about our other two features.

* * * * *

Midnight was created by Jack Cole (of Plastic Man fame) for the old Quality line of comics, under direct orders of his publisher and editor. Let's face it: the original Midnight was meant to imitate Will Eisner's *The Spirit* — a classic even then. Quality was reprinting *The Spirit*, and they were concerned that the feature might be undermined (I'm being polite) by Eisner's being drafted into that little brouhaha we call World War II. Cole was far too creative to do an imitation of anything, and Midnight was quite an entertaining feature, even if the hero did look like *The Spirit*.

In recreating Midnight, we wanted to take the character as far away from *The Spirit* as

possible while preserving the more unusual, highly pulp-oriented aspects of the feature. Max Collins recommended his friend, the award-winning mystery and western novelist Ed Gorman — Ed's also the editor of *Mystery Scene* magazine and of my absolute all-time favorite mystery collections, *The Black Lizard Anthologies of Crime Fiction*. Most recently, Ed teamed up with Bob Randall to edit *Under the Gun*, another first-rate mystery anthology (all three books, by the way, include Max Collins stories).

If all you've seen from artist Graham Nolan is his work on POWER OF THE ATOM or the brand-new, just released HAWKWORLD monthly (in which he inks his own stuff), then you probably missed his more pulp-oriented work for Eclipse Comics. Not to worry; a quick look at this story and you'll see why he was my first and only choice to draw Midnight.

* * * * *

Our Illustrated Story segment is an attempt to turn the tables on history: since MS. TREE QUARTERLY takes its influence from the old heroic character pulps, it was only fair to round out each issue with an illustrated pulp-like story, featuring stories about comics characters in prose form.

We are starting off with Batman, written by Denny O'Neil and illustrated by Mike Grell, for the following reasons: 1) Denay's quite the prose writer, and it's nice to see him exercise that part of his brain once again; 2) Mike's quite the illustrator, something about which most comics fans are unaware; and 3) hey, this is the first issue of an uncostumed female hero comic book, and this story's starring Batman, and we ain't stupid. We're going to give MS. TREE every chance we can.

Upcoming stories will be featuring The Butcher, the Dead Detective, Inspector Henderson, Omac in the 20th Century, and Wild Dog. Our creative teams will include Mike Baron and Shea Anton Pensa, John Ostrander and William Messner-Loebs, Jerry Ordway and Jerry Ordway, John Byrne and John Byrne, and Max Collins and Denys Cowan. Mix and match. (Oh, so why isn't Terry Beatty illustrating Wild Dog? Hey, do you have any idea how long it takes a person to pencil and ink 48 pages? Well, most artists take slightly longer than three months... which poses a problem if you're doing a book called MS. TREE QUARTERLY.)

The talented Dean Motter — of *Mister X* and THE PRISONER fame — is our designer on this series, handling the look of

the words and pictures. An art director's dream... or, perhaps more accurately, an editor's dream and possibly an art director's nightmare. Anyway, Dean makes a valuable and (for the world of comics) unique contribution to our series of Illustrated Stories.

* * * * *

Most comic books need a cover (not all; check out *Weird Organic Tales*), and in keeping with our pulp influences, we've decided to do with cover paintings here on MS. TREE QUARTERLY. Mike Grell kicks off our series, and Mike will be back before too long. Denys Cowan (who's also doing cover paintings on THE QUESTION QUARTERLY) and Scott Hampton are next in line.

* * * * *

Overall, we're real proud of MS. TREE QUARTERLY. It's quite a challenge, and the way everybody's pulling together to make this concept work is quite a sight to behold. My deepest thanks to all involved.

* * * * *

One of the most popular features in the previous series of *Ms. Tree* comics was the scintillating and provocative letter column, written by Max Collins and subtly titled *Swak!*. The editor knows a good thing when he sees it, and the oft-mentioned Mr. Collins will be resuming the *Swak!*

column in our next issue. Therefore, kindly send your letters of comment to

Swak! / Ms. Tree Quarterly
c/o DC Comics Inc.
666 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10103

After I read 'em, I'll be mailing them off to Max. Let me encourage you to comment on both *Midnight* and our Illustrated Story features as well: we need all the feedback we can get.

* * * * *

A very deep and personal thank you to Mickey Spillane for selflessly, freely and quickly giving us the MS. TREE endorsement quote we've been proudly using in our promotion work. Mickey's latest book — indeed, his first Mike Hammer novel in two decades — is called *The Killing Man*, and it's like the man never stopped writing the things. If you like MS. TREE and you've never read a Mike Hammer novel, you've truly been missing something. Check it out.

* * * * *

One of the regular "features" in each issue of the old *Ms. Tree* series was an ad from my old friends, Robert and Phyllis Weinberg. These folks have been busy selling mystery, pulp, fantasy, and science-fiction stuff for years... they're also co-sponsors of the

annual Chicago Comicon comic art convention, which happens to be my alma maire.

Among the zillions of items they keep in stock just happens to be the complete works of Max Collins — at least, the stuff that's in print. This includes his sundry prose series: Elliot Ness, Nolan, Mallory, Dick Tracy, and the king of the Collins canon, the Nate Heller series. The Weinbergs also keep Max's critical and nostalgic works in stock, and they stock Ed Gorman's *Black Lizard* anthologies, to boot. They probably have some sort of catalog or something; if you're having a hard time finding any individual Collins or Gorman titles, try dropping them a letter at 15145 Oxford Drive, Oak Forest Illinois 60452, or call 'em at 708-687-5765.

* * * * *

In three months... *Ms. Tree* takes off against a satanic cult in her typical laid back manner, but peculiarly, she gets a lot *less* than she bargains for. Which doesn't do much to lengthen her expected life span, believe me. Collins and Beatty at the dueling banjos, natch.

Plus... the return of *Midnight*, by Gorman and Nolan (the artist, not the paperback hero), and our second Illustrated Story. And a painted cover from Denys Cowan.

Have a nice summer.

— Mike Gold



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